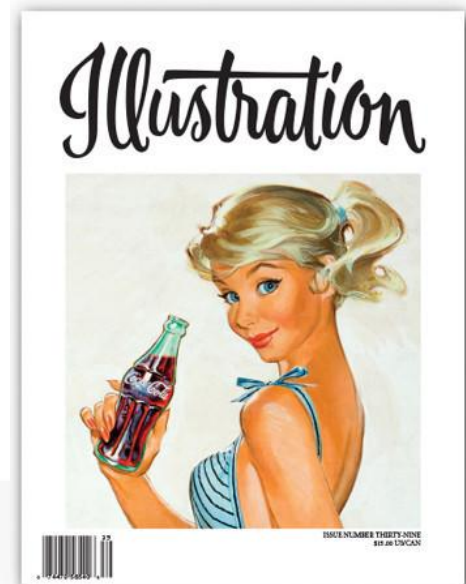


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Digital Illustration by Heinrich Kley. Photograph courtesy of Illustration House, Inc.

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Heinrich Kley

Exploring the Enigma

Alexander Kunkel Interviewed by Joseph V. Procopio

Heinrich Kley (1863-1943) was born in Karlsruhe, Germany, where he eventually studied at the Karlsruhe School of Fine Arts under famous painter Ferdinand Kuhn. He moved to Munich in 1890, where he ran a studio in teaching the artistic and financial business and in building a body of work that has made a lasting impression to this day on all of those fortunate enough to have seen it. Those familiar with Kley's work know that he is an artist who delights in the human comedy, which in Kley's eyes could run from the pitch black to the tender and frivolous. Fortunately, Kley wasn't a misanthrope, but if he is an any self-loater, he definitely went through life at least somewhat, and perhaps even a touch tormented by human folly.

As it turns out, Kley spent the first five decades of his life being his artistic muse, although the talent was evident from even his delighting efforts. Likely out of a sense of cosmic pragmatism, Kley's early ambition was to carve a niche for himself as a commissioned painter of industrial and mechanical landscapes and as a book illustrator. But like many artists, the work that eventually brought Kley lasting fame was the art he made for himself (and his wife), and not necessarily that made to order for remuneration. It was a working ideal that saw Kley's sketchbook doodles and casual illustrations that convinced him he should try to sell them to the periodical publishers of the day. These works were collected independently as a handful of volumes in Germany in Kley's lifetime, and then a couple of retrospectives in the intervening years in the United States.

Strangely enough, Kley has been far better known and regarded in the United States than in his land of nativity, although partially explained by how enthusiastically Walt Disney and

his animators embraced Kley's work in the early 1940s (much of Disney's later Kley's designs and by how little recognized in his nation would be from the artist in Germany. Much of what has been written about Kley in the past century or so, in English or otherwise, has been piecemeal copied over on far-out fanbooks. That all changed in the past couple of years when German art historian Alexander Kunkel devoted his doctoral thesis to Kley's life and work, finally providing the scholarly rigor that the artist so richly deserves. Kunkel has subsequently organized exhibits of Kley's work, and is now recognized as the preeminent authority on this subject. The recently released book, *The Last Art of Heinrich Kley: Volume 2 of 2* (Picture This Press, 2011) include definitive biography and analysis of Kley for the first time in English by Kunkel, Michael Von Kallen, and other contemporary scholars and critics. The following interview attempts to complement that information by exploring with Kunkel some facets of the enigmatic artist that are not covered in these more traditional biographical essays and appraisals.

The interview was conducted on May 2, 2012, and was edited for clarity by Procopio and Kunkel.

JP: When did you first encounter Heinrich Kley's work?

AK: I was about 15 years old, still going to school, and I happened upon an antiquarian book shop here in Newark where they sold a lot of illustrated books from the late 19th and early 20th century. This is when I found one of the albums that were published before World War I. I think it was *Heinrich Kley and His Contemporaries*.

I was just fascinated by Kley's very loose line, which did not

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