Joseph Wopfner (1843-1927), Austrian
Holiday on Lake Chiem, c. 1885

The theme of the family fishing in a small boat close to shore is a familiar one in the work of the Austrian-born landscape painter Josef Wopfner. He established his reputation based on charming views of fishermen and farmers in Bavaria.

In this painting, a family enjoys a holiday fishing on Lake Chiem. Here the strong mother steers the boat with her paddle in the back of the boat, while the father steadies the boat up front in the bow. An older daughter holds the net with the catch. One wooden box trap has been pulled up next to the boat, and another one is shown submerged in the water. Two smaller children ride in the boat, a little girl and a blond boy.

Wopfner trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Munich with Karl von Piloty and he befriended Wilhelm Leibl. In 1869, Wopfner met Courbet at the time of the Great International Art Exhibition in Munich. This contact, and a journey to France, introduced him to plein-air painting.

After graduation in 1872, Wopfner discovered Lake Chiem. It was an almost untouched natural refuge which attracted many artists. Lake Chiem became his artistic homeland where he was to draw endless inspiration for most of his paintings each summer for many years.

Drawing from his precise studies of nature undertaken en plein air, he executed landscapes such as Holiday on Lake Chiem filled with fisherman or farmers, usually at work. Frequently, as in Widener Art Gallery's painting, he placed his figures in an atmosphere of soft luminous light and rippling reflections. An overall poetic stillness evokes the unique tone.

Painting at a time when landscape painting had gained popularity, artists such as Wopfner often blended the moods of romanticism with the naturalism characteristic of the growing preference for realism. In some of his landscape paintings, his brushstroke was used freely, at some points reaching the threshold of Impressionism.

Wopfner became a professor of the Munich Royal Academy in 1888 and an honorary member beginning in 1896. At the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London in 1890, he was awarded a gold medal.

Nancy Miller Batty