

Cultural crossroads

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CULTURAL CROSSROADS.

by OLIVIER REVERDIN.

This happened three or four years ago, on a Sunday afternoon. Spring was in its full glory.

Anet is a big Bernese village, on the fringes of a plain, which used formerly to be bogland and which lies between the lakes of Neuchâtel, of Bienne and of Morât and which, for that reason is called "Seeland," that is to say Lake Country.

The light was very soft and the orchards surrounding the village were all in blossom, the pale pink petals of the apple-trees, floating lightly like rosy snow-flakes, when carried away by the breeze. Among the fresh green of the meadows, one saw the bright yellow of dandelions. The first daisies had come out already, and there was also sage to be seen.

On that particular day, Anet was extraordinarily animated. People were coming there in large numbers, in motor cars, in vehicles drawn by great, strong horses, on bicycles and on foot. And, why was this? Because of a love for painting, for pictures! Yes, simply for that reason.

I must tell you that Anet is the birthplace of one of the most popular painters in Switzerland — Albert Anker. He lived and painted there for a long time, during the second half of the last century and the first years of this century. He died in 1910.

He must have been a delightful man. His pictures and sketches are full of the joy of living. In them are to be seen, chiefly, peasants and scenes of village life. Here is a little school-girl, with blond pig-tails, who carries her slate and pencil, with a timid air. That boy, over there, wearing a big woollen cap on his head, must have been engaged in a fierce snow-ball battle with his school-mates on their way home from school. The redness of his cheeks shows that it is cold outside. He looks sturdy and well.

Here we see the people coming out of church. The women are wearing their best Sunday clothes, the national costume being particularly attractive and flattering in this part of the Canton of Berne, and each one holds her prayer-book in her hand.

All the ages of man are to be found in these paintings, from the infant in its cradle to the old man on his death-bed. All the hours of the day, also, and all the seasons of the year. Together, they form a marvellous symphony.

You must not imagine that Anker was just a painter of pretty pictures, an artist possessing a facile and superficial genre. No; he was a great deal better than that. He was a true painter and a great artist. His work is impregnated with an exquisite poetry, discreet and fine, as well as with an authentic rural flavour. These paintings of his have a rhythm, a great plastic beauty, a modesty and serenity which makes them most attractive, whilst the colours constitute a marvellous harmony.

His works are distributed among the museums of Berne and of Neuchâtel (where Anker lived for a long time) as well as among public and private collections. Some years ago, the Municipality of Anet had the excellent idea of gathering together the greater part of this artist's work. A gymnasium was turned into an exhibiton hall, where they were placed.

The success of this exhibition surpassed all expectations. Day after day, and especially on Sundays, crowds poured in to view the pictures. Why was this? Because Anker is a painter who is really popular in the best sense of that term. Reproductions of his pictures are to be seen everywhere: in school-rooms, in childrens' rooms, in country inns, in the farms and the chalets, as well as in the homes of city dwellers. They have thus become familiar. The people love them, because they discover in them the true expression of their own sentiments and ideals. They appreciate the charm and modesty, the intimate and true character which emanates from them.

And that is the reason why, as soon as this exhibition had been announced, people rushed to it, from all parts of Switzerland. What a touching sight it was, to find in this small village, this mixed crowd in which the rich industrial, who had come in his big American car, rubbed elbows with the worker who had arrived on his bicycle or motor-cycle, the farmer who had driven over in his horse-drawn market-cart and all the other people who had come by train. The whole of the Swiss people, without any distinction of class, associated themselves with the homage paid to Albert Anker.

A village nestling in a bower of orchards in bloom, an exquisite painter, an entire people crowding in a pilgrimage for the purpose of admiring his paintings and thus pay tribute to his memory, this marvellous understanding between the artist and the public — does not all this evoke the picture of a happy country?



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