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JACK OF ALL ART, MASTER OF MOST

by
MELVER CAMBELL

At first, I thought I'd got the wrong man. The white-clad figure, track-suited and sandalled, reminded me more of a boxer (Max Baer?) than an artist.

The wedgy, pugilist's nose also misled me, and his dank tousled Tony Curtis hairdo made me think again of a boxer stepping out from under a shower after a quick work-out in the ring. And the house was certainly big enough to accommodate a gymnasium, if not a complete training camp and staff.

But a glance at his hands told me that I was, indeed, being introduced to Hans Erni, the Swiss artist whose many-splendoured talents and mastery of line have been compared to those of Leonardo da Vinci.

Erni invited me into "the factory" — his term for the beautiful home he has at Meggen, sprawled elegantly over the slopes above Lake Lucerne.

* * *

I had the feeling, on glancing at a well-known face as I entered, that I was interrupting a house party for Top People.

At the other end of the room — about 20 feet away — Albert Einstein appeared to be rising from his chair as we came in, and I could almost hear the chair creak.

But I had been misled again. It was, of course, one of many living paintings done by Erni, the master portraitist, strikingly set off against the stark black and white beauty of the general decor in his ultra-modern and comfortable "factory".

Erni is a factory-hand who prefers to work on the night shift, despite the enormous windows which makes up one wall of his two-storey studio. It is a scene of organised chaos, voluminous witness to his diversified talents with all of Art's media — china ink drawings,

chalk sketches, lithographs, gouaches, tempera and pottery work, and, of course, oils.

* * *

Noting my bewildered gaze at the production line, Erni, an athletic and young-looking 52-year-old, added ruefully: "On top of this, I've become interested in photography and have just bought a camera. But I hardly get time to take it out of the case."

Born in Lucerne, where his father was engineer aboard one of the lake steamers, Erni might have built the house he now lives in (opposite the English cemetery), "if I'd had a better head for figures". Numerical figures, that is, for when the young Erni first started to work he was apprenticed as a building surveyor's assistant and architectural draughtsman. He gave it up to study art — at the School of Arts and Crafts in Lucerne, the Académie Julian in Paris, and at Berlin's State Academy.

* * *

In Paris he soon became noticed, and befriended, by some of the leading artists of the day — among them, Henry Moore and Picasso. He fell under Picasso's influence, for a time: "Nearly all those of my works which he rated highly were results of his influence."

Now perhaps the main thing the two artists have in common lies in their pottery work, executed as incidental to their pottery designs. Little of the Picasso influence can be seen in Erni's work to-day, though his brushwork does Dali a bit at times.

Erni's name was recognised in his homeland when he returned from his travels in Europe shortly before the second World War, just in time to accept a commission for a gigantic mural in the 1939 Swiss National Exhibition. Then he was drafted into the Swiss Army, as a camouflage expert. ("After I'd camouflaged ammunition

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caves, they ruined it all by refusing to camouflage the railway lines leading up to and away from them.”)

Erni scored another mural success with his three-part mural commissioned for the Brussels World Fair in 1958.

This year, his vast mosaic for the Abbey of St. Maurice in the Valais has been exhibited, and acclaimed, throughout Europe and America. Now he is engrossed in his work as art director and working illustrator of a 10-volume encyclopaedia to be published in Britain and America.

The off-duty time Erni allows himself is spent with his attractive, young Swiss wife, Doris (a big hand in running the factory, and their family of three Simone, 15, Sybille, 4, and two-year-old Felix).

* * *

A current exhibition of his works in Lucerne will remain open until 30th September, before being put on show in Zurich.

The same show will be exhibited in Geneva early next year.

But if you miss all these, there's always a permanent one-exhibit free show in Lucerne's main station: a huge fresco done by Erni in 1935, one of the first of his many prize-winning works.

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EDINBURGH

Cold grey air
cold grey buildings
swirling mist
cobble stair
celtic lift
swinging kilt
pipers melancholy song.

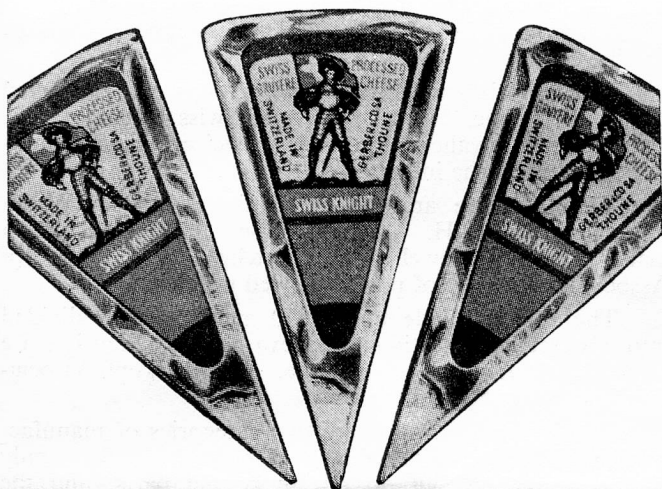
Glimpse
of tall spires
through iron walls
still blue eyes of a child that calls —
from the lamp suspended alley.

Music from the smoke of a train
the rain.

View from Carltons green hill
to a city silent and still.

Lazy smoking chimneys
nestled there below
shrill cry of a lost gull
telling us its time to go.

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