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En route to the forbidden paradise

With a comprehensive exhibition, the Museum of Fine Arts in Berne is offering a unique opportunity to discover and rediscover Albert Anker, one of Switzerland's major artists. His paintings are a key part of Swiss art history.

By Annemarie Monteil

Albert Anker (1831-1910), from Ins in Berne, is as much a part of Switzerland as the Alps and yodelling. Reproductions of his portraits of children and village scenes are well-known from calendars, school books and living rooms. Of late, his "country lad" has featured on an 85 cent stamp, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Berne is organising a major retrospective to mark the centenary of his death. Anker would appear to be an undeniably important figure. This is reflected in the high prices achieved at auction, yet in conversation people are rather underwhelmed. For progres-

sive strategists, Anker represents a folklore that is no longer relevant. They see the fact that Christoph Blocher, a politician from the Swiss People's Party (SVP), owns a quarter of the paintings in the exhibition as confirmation of this. Opponents of an "ideal world" see Anker's paintings as deceiving idylls. For others, the reading grandfather supersedes attending church. Snobs say "nothing new there", while young people are captivated and want to know more.

These contrasting opinions are no reproach to Anker. True simplicity can con-

fuse those who are complicated. He himself did not follow the easy road. Having grown up in the educated family of a vet, he studied theology as his father wished, agonising over his longing to become an artist: "Art seems like a forbidden paradise to me", he wrote. He finally became a pupil of Charles Gleyre, which made him happy, but left him with a bad conscience. To his disappointed father he remained "my painter contre-cœur".

This made his success even more significant. Anker was able to exhibit at the much-coveted "Salon", whereas Manet, Degas and Monet were rejected. He lived in Paris in the winter months, he was well versed in topics ranging from Plato to Darwin and he spoke French with his friends. In the summer, he lived and painted in his grandparents' house in Ins, popular and revered. His genre paintings were in keeping with contemporary tastes. In the emerging federal state, Anker-



«Mädchen, die Haare flechtend». Anker gives equal attention to the book, cloth and plait: not fastidious realism but an inclination towards the everyday things in life.



«Grossvater mit schlafender Enkelin». Critics say Anker only painted old people and children. They were the only models who had time to sit for him instead of working the land.



«Schreibunterricht II». Learning to write is not an easy task and certainly no idyll.



«Tee und Cognac». In his still life paintings, Albert Anker draws inspiration from 200 years ago and the master Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin.

like Calame, Koller and Zünd – was a voice for the nation. “Armensuppe” (Distribution of Soup to the Poor) symbolises Switzerland’s humanitarian tradition and the “Schulspaziergang” (School Promenade) embodies Pestalozzi’s liberal approach to education. Paintings of dead children were popular. Anker depicted a small group of children weeping softly around a small corpse: “Die tote Freundin” (The Little Friend) is a piece of theatrical melodrama, along with its title. Anker later painted his own dead child using vivid art far removed from popular taste, and in the dark background he inscribed “liebe liebe Ruedeli” (my dearest Ruedeli).

That is another side to Anker. It is impossible to make sweeping statements about him. Even the title of the exhibition in Berne, “Schöne Welt” (Beautiful World), falls short of the mark. Anker painted neither a happy nor a beautiful world. Many of his paintings are tinged with a slight melancholy. The chil-

dren often look stern or precocious, old people are thin-lipped, and the farmers still have dirt under their fingernails even in their Sunday best. Forbidden paradise?

Perhaps we get closest to Anker in his portraits, which make up the biggest part of his work. With slightly conventional elegance, he painted urban ladies and gentlemen as his clients wanted. The portraits – like some genre paintings – seem somewhat academic and laboured (was he still trying to please his father?). Despite the fineness of the brushstrokes, layer upon layer, the texture of the art seems too restrained. As though he were performing a duty. He once sent a wealthy businessman to a photographer, saying he did “not do such work on command”.

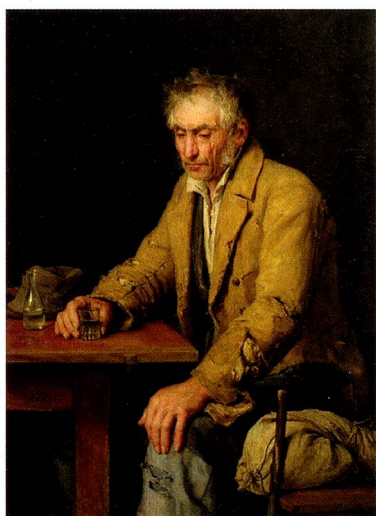
It was an altogether different matter with the people from the village, whom Anker would invite into his studio – this was fine portrait work. Is the secret of great art empathy? Feeling a connection? In wondrous unity,

everything seems equally important to the artist – the little face bent over the writing tablet and the apple for break time, the grandparents’ wrinkles and knitted stockings. It is this engaging outlook on life which gives ordinary people and things a brilliant majesty, turns intimacy into art and still life into rural icons. The painting is soft and airy, and an indescribable light pervades everything: no “prohibition” here, just paintings of paradise.

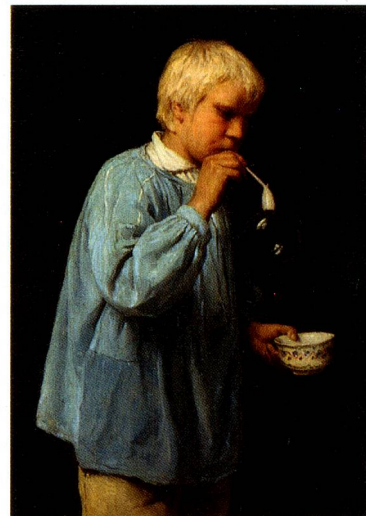
Exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Berne until 5 September 2010. Albert Anker – Beautiful World catalogue CHF 58

ANKER GOLD COIN

The Federal Mint Swissmint is dedicating the official 2010 gold coin to Albert Anker to mark the year commemorating the famous Swiss artist. The special coin with a face value of 50 Swiss francs is available from all banks and coin dealers. It is limited edition. www.swissmint.ch



«Der Trinker». There is nothing cheery about old age. Reality is reflected in Anker’s work.



«Der Seifenbläser». It is not just the motif but also the glimmering, silky application of paint (visible in the original) that gives the bubble the magical air of weightlessness.



«Der Schulspaziergang». In 1872, Albert Anker, himself a member of the School Supervisory Board, called for mandatory co-educational schooling.



«Der Schneebär». The artist knows the Bernese well. They don’t build snowmen, but instead “snow bears”, their heraldic animal.