

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 81 (2015)
Heft: [2]

Artikel: Naïve peasant art around the Säntis mountain
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943533>

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Naïve peasant art around the Säntis Mountain

Naïve peasant art (Bauernmalerei) created around the Säntis mountain is unique among alpine folk art worldwide. It is one of Switzerland's 167 unique living traditions identified for possible inclusion into a UNESCO list of cultural traditions.

Who with smattering of Swiss knowledge has not seen the naïve peasant paintings created around the Säntis Mountain? Whether it's on a postcard, a calendar or a table setting, these paintings have made their way into modern life with their charm and intimacy. They are instantly recognisable by rows of cows driven up and down the mountains by colourful alpine herdsmen ("Sennen"), against the backdrop of rich meadows and lovely farm houses.

Art in the region was originally thought to have started in the 1600s with the painting of rooms and furniture, including beds, trunks and wardrobes, depicting ornamental designs of flora and fauna. It also comprised glass paintings, a popular art form of the times.



Milk pail bottom: descent from the Alp in mountain landscape

After 1750, the paintings increasingly covered allegorical scenes of life on the farm and hunt, and also biblical scenes.

The depiction of farming scenes was originally thought to have started in the early 1800s. However, a recent discovery of a wall painting behind wood panelling in an old farmhouse in Gais shows that such peasant art likely started as early as the 16th century. Conrad Starck, born in Gonten in 1765, is considered one of the pioneers of peasant art, starting with the depiction of an alpine cattle drive on a wardrobe in 1809. He was followed



Cattle drive in landscape with farm houses, by Johann Baptist Zeller (undated, early 1900s)

by a number of well-known painters who expanded and grew the tradition. In the 19th century, peasant paintings started to appear on "Fahreimer-Boedel" (the bottom of milk pails carried on the shoulders of the herdsmen), "Sennenstreifen" (farming strips - accounts of a whole herd of cows on long strips of paper or wooden panels), as well as on window shutters and outside walls. It depicted the day-to-day life of local farmers, and also their respective environments and 'heemet': their homeland. Notably, the art was generally created by artists for, and not by farmers.

In the second half of the twentieth century, many became interested in the peasant art of the Appenzell and the Toggenburg. Increasingly, it was used by businesses and the tourist industry in their advertising campaigns. Scientists and art enthusiasts however considered these modern pieces to be merely souvenirs and nostalgic. Today it is recognised that this was a misconception. A great creative energy exists among the artists of today, each with their own personal styles. They are closely involved in the ongoing development of this wonderful art. Of note is the painter Albert Manser, perhaps a relative of our very own Tony Manser of the Auckland Swiss Club.

Susie Wood

Sources:

www.appenzeller-museum-stein.ch, www.appenzell.info/.../bauernmalerei-kunstmalerie, www.lebendige-traditionen.ch/traditionen

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Farming strip