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HOW SKIRA BOOKS BEGAN

by

INGRID ETTER

The slender absentminded-looking man with pepper-and-paprika hair and the eyes of a poet was sitting at a very long oak refectory table — the most outstanding item in an unassuming, small room.

But despite its proportions, the table provides insufficient work space for the man who sits there: "When I'm preparing a book, it just isn't big enough, and pages litter the floor."

... For this was the Geneva office of Albert Skira, the world's greatest publisher of colour-reproduction art books.

Albert Skira, who has other offices in Paris and New York, is a Swiss from the Tessin. His family emigrated there from Spain in the 17th century.

He himself is the son of an engineer who had no special interest in art. The spark of Albert's own genius was kindled by a humpbacked, all-wise music teacher or whom the boy was sent at the age of 12. This teacher taught him — if not the piano, which seems to have been an impossible task — to read Nietzsche, appreciate Baudelaire... and to admire Picasso.

Albert was well-schooled: so great was his appreciation of the artist that the first money he later earned as a bank clerk was spent (all £8 of it) on buying a Picasso gouache.

A few years ago, Pablo, now an old friend ("so close I don't even have to write to him", explained Skira with a warm smile), made seven drawings of Skira at one sitting.

The *New Yorker* recently told the story of how that friendship began: Skira, a young, ambitious would-be art publisher, phoned the artist's Paris number every day for a year, and finally got him to illustrate a book — the famous edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that is to-day worth £3,000 a copy, if you can get one. (Skira himself admits he can't. But perhaps, at that price, he hasn't tried hard.)

At first the *Metamorphoses* nearly heralded Skira's ruin: no one wanted to buy it at the £1200 he was charging.

The only order came from a London librarian, Anthony Zwemmer. Although desperately in debt, Skira

could not resist taking a train to London just to see what his sole client looked like. He has never forgotten him.

Skira's next great venture was to publish the poetry of Mallarmé, illustrated by Matisse.

At that time his Paris office, just behind Picasso's house, was so small he could not have opened one of his own larger volumes in it. (Picasso used to blow a toy trumpet from his window when he wanted to speak to his neighbour.)

"The French are still undoubtedly the greatest bibliophiles," Skira told me, "but the Americans are taking a much closer interest in art than formerly. I've even had a request from *Time* magazine to assist their art section: the mere fact that they want to develop that section of the publication shows a growing trend. "I have also", he added kindly, "received a communication from Texas concerning post-card reproductions of works of art. It's a sign."

(Reproduced by courtesy of *Weekly Tribune*, Geneva)

Letter from Washington

A striking exhibition, "Arctic Riviera," which illustrates the sublime and awesome beauty of north-eastern Greenland, is currently on view at the American Museum of Natural History. This exhibition of 74 superb black-and-white and colour photographs is being circulated throughout the United States by the Smithsonian Institution Travelling Exhibition Service. It is sponsored by the Embassy of Switzerland in the U.S.A.

The magnificent photographs are the work of Ernst Hofer, chief of the Swiss Federal Topographical Service, who spent four summers in desolate north-east Greenland as a member of scientific expeditions. His official function was to take photographs, especially aerial photographs, to be used for geographical study of the area and for cartography (map making).

Many of the sweeping panoramas of frozen landscapes, majestic mountains, mighty glaciers, and placid fjords were originally taken for this purpose, but Hofer also photographed anything he saw of beauty or human interest. Among his finest pictures are those of fantastic icebergs that are like abstract sculpture and his winning portraits of eskimos add greatly to the exhibition. He recorded the faces of both the charming children and the rugged old hunters of many years' experience in the Northland.

Hofer also photographed the animals his expedition encountered, and the flowers that bloom so abundantly, although briefly, in that short summer interlude when the midnight sun bathes north-east Greenland in a calm and beauty all its own, truly transforming it into an "Arctic Riviera."

Hofer's breathtaking photographs have been published in Berne, 1957, in a book entitled "Arctic Riviera."

This exhibition has been made possible through the co-operation of the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research, and the Museum of Science in Boston, where it was first shown.

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