

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1961)
Heft: 1385

Artikel: Swiss Graphic art 1750-1850
Autor: Schweizer, W. R.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689397>

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SWISS GRAPHIC ART 1750-1850

by

Professor W. R. SCHWEIZER

Professor W. R. Schweizer was the guest of the London Section of Nouvelle Société Helvétique at their meeting on April 18th, at the Swiss Hostel for Girls, at Belsize Grove.

Mr. W. Renz, the outgoing President opened the proceedings by welcoming the lecturer. He also took the opportunity to introduce the new President of the Society, Mr. Homberger, to the meeting. Mr. Homberger afterwards took the chair.

The large audience had a chance before the meeting to examine, and admire, an exhibition of paintings about which Prof. Schweizer was to speak. Both the pictures and the lecture aroused great interest and it was clear that the lecturer, as the Chairman said when expressing his thanks to him at the end, was in love with his subject. The audience also appropriately showed its appreciation.

The following is a compressed version of the lecture, kindly rewritten for the Swiss Observer by Prof. Schweizer himself.

In the course of some 500 years Switzerland has given birth to quite a galaxy of great artists who have achieved world fame: architects from Fontana to Le Corbusier, and painters from Holbein to Angelika Kauffmann, Heinrich Fuessli (called Fuseli in England), H. Arnold Boecklin, and many others. But although they have contributed to the culture and happiness of humanity, what they have created can hardly be called typically Swiss. We could, of course, construct speculatively what might be regarded specifically Helvetic traits in their work, but that might be far-fetched, mere speculation and guesswork.

However, when we turn, to the masters of flourishing period of Swiss graphic art we are faced with something not merely novel, unique, and beautiful, but with a sort of art that can be called truly characteristically Swiss. Yet though they have gained the love and admiration of a large part of civilized humanity, they do not rank with the greatest, and that for two reasons: their topics were entirely national and did not include the traditional subjects which had for a long time aroused the feelings of pity, fear, sympathy, the tragic or other emotions of humanity on an international plane. And secondly these artists avoided the large size canvases and avoided painting in oil. It is on account of the small size of their drawings and prints that they are usually referred to as the Kleinmeister or Little Masters.

The main inspiration of these artists was not classical antiquity, or any other old tradition, but the new love of nature, the new emotion of "Naturgefühl", whose origin was in England and from where it spread to all parts of Europe and the new currents of irrationalism, or emotionalism. These currents led to a closer study of real nature and in art to a gradual abandonment of the "composed", imaginary landscape, and to a faithful representation of real scenery and real people. And in graphic art it led to the cult of colour which had a greater appeal to the feeling than the formal black and white art hitherto practised in the drawing and print: the etching, woodcut and line-engraving, e.g., of Merian, Herrliberger and even Salomon Gessner in his etched idylls, charming Roccocco fantasies with Arcadian

shepherds and shepherdesses, fauns and nymphs. Decisive inspirations towards a new and more realistic Swiss art came from two works of literature: the didactic poem "Die Alpen" (1729) by Albrecht Haller, and the Novel "La nouvelle Heloise" by J. J. Rousseau (1761).

Both gave enthusiastic descriptions of the Alps and their beauties, unknown to humanity so far; Haller referred to the high Alps and the life of their people, Rousseau to the shores of the lake of Geneva. Both suggested a call "back to nature", back to the pure natural, healthy and simple and happy life of rustic folk. In Haller's poem (just read lines 71-80, 101-118 and 321-40) we have the first realistic and poetic description of the high Alps, lines that inspired large numbers of tourists to visit these as yet unknown parts of Switzerland. Haller's verses on the Staubbach at Lauterbrunnen (lines 350 ff.) made this cascade the most famous of the civilized world and one of the classical places of the Alps. One of Goethe's finest nature odes was suggested by it when he visited the lovely waterfall:

"des Menschen Seele gleicht dem Wasser,
Vom Himmel kommt es,
Zum Himmel steigt es."

With the Staubbach all the other great waterfalls of Switzerland became objects of admiration. They appealed to the pantheistic feelings of the age which saw in them dynamic expressions of the Divine force in Nature. It became the ambition of every artist of the age to draw these cascades: the Fall of the Rhine, of the Giessbach, the Reichenbach, the Pissevache and many others. Haller's poem had incalculable influence on the artistic currents of his country. Directly or indirectly it inspired the bulk of the scenery and figure subjects represented in the drawings, water-colours and coloured prints of contemporary Swiss artists.

The second great literary stimulus to art was Rousseau's Nouvelle Heloise, that best-seller of his age. It made the district of Clarens and other scenes near le Lac Lemman places of pilgrimage for untold hundreds of thousands of travellers who wanted to witness the glory, the beauty the fresh air of that unknown world, and the happiness of its inhabitants. And again impact on art was profound.

But the material incentive to Swiss artistic activity in the age—after all the artist has to live—came from the increasing number of travellers and their increasing demand for visual pictorial souvenirs of the places and people seen. And to satisfy that demand the artist felt impelled to paint and draw those places and the people and their environment, life, customs and costumes. The growing love of nature first encouraged the poet to look at it more closely, his poetic creations inspired tourism, and all the three of them inspired the art of the Kleinmeister. This is one aspect of the logic of history and of the process which led to that flourishing period of Swiss graphic art from 1750 to 1850.

The Kleinmeister did not form a closely knit school though they all met and lived for a time in Berne, and though they were following the same aims, cultivating the same subjects and the same technique. Within these features they displayed considerable personal differences.

Their great and novel topic was the real landscape, and that of their own native land and its people. These were represented with a realistic fidelity hardly known before. And the other novel feature was the technique of colouring the drawing, the water-colour and the print: the outline etching first, the aquatint later, and finally the lithograph, all coloured by hand.

The first and oldest of the Kleinmeister was Joh. Ludwig Aberli, of Winterthur (1723-86). In about 1766 he became aware that a topographic drawing and print could be an aesthetically enjoyable work of art, and his method of printing and colouring outline etchings had such an amazing effect and proved so successful for the unlimited reproduction of the scenes drawn that it was adopted by all his colleagues at home and by many abroad. Their colouring was of such a novel tender beauty that they created the impression of great depth and atmospheric perspective. And it has been said that it inspired the colouring of the great English landscape painters of the age. Aberli's pupils adopted and varied his method with equal success: Heinrich Rieter collaborated closely with him and continued his work after Aberli's death. F. N. Koenig, the two Lorys, Dunker, Linck, Hackert, Spruenglin and J. J. Biedermann — they all, and many others, followed Aberli's example in their representation of landscapes. But at least five masters stood out from the rest by choosing figure subjects. Freudenberger, Mind, Koenig and the two Lorys in addition to Reinhard, one of the leading masters of the costume print. Freudenberger has always been the most popular and attractive artist of the whole group. Haller's Alpen and the influences of his training in Paris as well as his admiration of Ostade made him choose human figures rather than the landscape, though his technique of the outline etching and of colouring are similar to those of Aberli. The simplicity and happiness of family life shown in their idyllic environment in Freudenberger's prints have always appealed to the art lover. They are Swiss *genre* at its best.

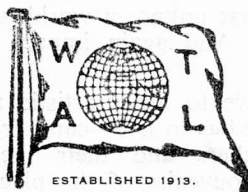
Freudenberger's later prints were usually coloured by Gottfried Mind, that strange human phenomenon: a helpless imbecile who had one outstanding talent, that of drawing and colouring things he had observed from

childhood: children, bears and cats, which he drew with such consummate artistry that an enthusiastic admirer, the lady painter, Vigee le Brun, called him le Rafael des chats — a sobriquet which has stuck.

The most versatile and prolific of all these Kleinmeister, however, was F. N. Koenig, whose delightful *genre* prints are somewhat reminiscent of Freudenberger, though he introduced new topics, new ways of colouring, as he brought an entirely new tone into the costume print and introduced lithography into Swiss graphic art.

A few years earlier the younger Lory had introduced the Aquatint with which he, then his father and his colourist, Huerlimann, achieved a refinement and subtlety hardly surpassed by any other artist using this process.

During the last decades of that glorious century the art of the coloured print declined, but the great works never lost their attraction to the art loving world. After all, they were perfect artistic achievements in their own way, and they still arouse nostalgic feelings for the happy days reflected in them, particularly in the prints of Freudenberger, Koenig and the Lorys. And, lastly, those masters had a strong sense of colouring which enabled them to understand and depict their native scenery as no foreign artist could. The Alpine scenery possesses a colourfulness which differs from the colouring of the Mediterranean world or that of northern Europe. Sunsets and sunrises produce hues in the Alps different from those elsewhere. As the sun moves through the sky in its daily course, the high mountains, the pure atmosphere, the peculiarly pure atmosphere and the clouds produce effects of form, of light and shade and colour that are unique there and seem to be in a permanent state of flux, changing almost every moment. The Swiss Kleinmeister were the first to observe this. As this observation helped to inspire their love of nature, and the love of their native scenery, it enhanced their sense of reality, their Wirklichkeitsfreude which has been characteristic of all Swiss art and literature since. All these features have helped to make the art of these Swiss masters things of beauty that came to be admired and loved by millions of people all over the world to this present day. And after all, as Keats says: "a thing of beauty is a joy for ever".



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