

Swiss painting in the twentieth century

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SWISS PAINTING IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By HANS CURJEL

Although Switzerland is not regarded actually as a country of painters, although it has no art centres comparable to Paris, Munich, Venice or New York, and even though there are no Swiss art academies or special art schools available for the rising generation of painters, the present time is, nevertheless, a flourishing period for painting in Switzerland. In three linguistic regions of the country — in the German, French and Italian areas — distinct groupings have constituted themselves, and there is a lively interchange of ideas going on. Also, the fourth ethnic region — the Rhaeto-Romanic district — has produced painters of marked individuality. The high artistic level of Swiss painting contributes in an essential way to the cultural image presented by Switzerland in our time, and Swiss painting stands up well in comparison with contemporary European art in general.

The artistic tradition of Switzerland goes far back into the past. It begins with the painting of the high medieval period, the magnificent manuscript illuminations of the Manesse MS. from Zurich, and the development continues in the works of the brilliant Konrad Witz, who lived in Basle and Geneva. This is followed by the masters of the Renaissance, Hans Holbein, Niklaus Manuel and Urs Graf. In the nineteenth century there appear painters of outstanding European stature, Arnold Böcklin and Giovanni Segantini. The great instigator of the modern flourishing of Swiss painting, however, was Ferdinand Hodler, in whose bold pictorial idiom there are realised typical features of the Swiss character. He saw the landscape and the people of Switzerland with new eyes and seized them in an artistic form in which the Swiss and the European are fused. Owing to his artistic force, painting became in a new sense an affair of the whole people, which in Hodler's works re-experienced itself and its country. Swiss painters were powerfully influenced by the example of Hodler. At that time the entire world began to take notice of the work of young Swiss artists, of their unconventional pictorial themes, the bold design concentrating on the essential, the intense chromatic effects, the plain simplicity of the inner attitude; the simple, white wooden frames replacing the ornamental gold frames symbolized the self-conscious and at the same time modest directness expressed by the pictures.

Hodler is the master of the young Swiss painters of his time, not their teacher. They eagerly turned their eyes and spirits to the great school of European painting which then dominated the scene: Impressionism, as well as Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin and the Norwegian Edvard Munch. Great original talents freely elaborated on the

admired models, without being slavishly bound by them. There developed strong artist personalities, in whom Hodler's message combined with that of the European masters led to a new idiom with its own distinctive character. A decisive role may have been played here by the native rustic element along with the innate Swiss love of freedom.

Thus the generation following Hodler produced a number of artists whose work put Swiss painting in the European spotlight. At their head stands Cuno Amiet (1868-1961): bold and uninhibited in the elaboration of luminous colours, intensive in design and psychological interpretation. Next to him are the Grisons Giovanni and Augusto Giacometti, of whom Augusto, a magician with colour, as early as the 'twenties began with abstract experiments. From the French-speaking part of Switzerland came René Auberjonois, who created works with a profound, spiritual, inwardly orientated character and with great aesthetic concentration. A member of the same generation, the Basle artist Heinrich Altherr developed an expressive monumental style which freely continues elements present in the work of Hodler. The next generation, those born in the 'eighties, produced strong and self-willed figures like Paul Basilius Barth, Hans Berger, Wilhelm Gimmi, Ernst Morgenthaler, Pietro Chiesa, Maurice Barraud, Fritz Pauli and Ignaz Epper; these people are distinguished mainly by a high level of painterly culture in the sense of "peinture". The younger Max Gubler also belongs to this group, he being an outstanding artistic talent.

Aside from this line of development is the inspired Otto Meyer-Amden (1885-1933), a visionary of great power and the tenderest lyricism, a composer of pictures. He is a master of the laws governing the construction of the picture and the polar tension of the picture, and he is in a certain sense a painterly prophet, thoroughly Swiss in his concentrated inner power and at the same time a figure of that infinite realm of art, to which belong the great ones of all times and peoples. His line of development was furthered by his friends Paul Bodmer and Hermann Huber.

Otto Meyer-Amden in his creations touches the dream world and the realm of the purely fantastic. Paul Klee is the master of these spheres of art. He was the son of a musician of German nationality, but he was born in Switzerland (at Münchenbuchsee near Berne), in 1879. He grew up in Switzerland; he spent the last years of his life in Berne, and he died in Muralto-Locarno in 1940. However, these are not the only reasons why he is to be regarded as a Swiss painter. Decisive features of his

character and his art are unmistakably Swiss: the inner pictorial plenitude, the fantastic narrative quality, the ironic-fantastic element, the psychological-pedagogical bent. Moreover, there are evident in his work hidden relationships to the primeval grotesque forces that continue to be given expression in popular customs and masks of Switzerland. From the fantastic scenes of the Basle Carnival to the pictorial ideas of Klee is but a step, by which, to be sure, the decisive transformation toward artistic creation takes place.

The most recent trends in art are having a great impact in Switzerland, and this is shown by the manifold liveliness with which many young Swiss painters are expressing themselves. In 1937 a large number of young artists banded together in the "Alliance" and made the decisive step from representational to non-representational art. The various underlying currents, which have emerged in European art in the twentieth century, making their appearance: the abstract, the constructive, which is called "concrete" by the artists themselves, the surrealist, the motion-visionary movements. A distinct Swiss feature can be discerned running through these various idioms: earnestness and intensity in grappling with themes, neatness of execution and a pronounced sense of organic, formal interrelationships.

A number of strong and imaginative personalities give definition and contour to these new trends which are also important beyond the frontiers of Switzerland. Especially worthy of mention among the concrete artists are,

above all, Max Bill, Richard P. Lohse, Camille Graeser, Hans Fischli and Fritz Glarner who lives in New York, among the so-called abstract artists, Leo Leuppi, Oskar Dalvit, Walter Bodmer and, not to be forgotten, the architect Le Corbusier, among the surrealists, the early deceased Walter Kurt Wiemken, Otto Tschumi, the late Hans Fischer and the Lucerne virtuoso Hans Erni who has recently been turning toward a new realism, among the motion-visionaries, Wilfried Moser, Charles Rollier, Hugo Weber, Rolf Iseli, Lenz Klotz and others.

Two outstanding Swiss artists of European scale are representing modern figurative painting: Alberto Giacometti, the world-famous sculptor who has died recently and was also one of the most sensitive painters of our time, and the Zurich painter Varlin, well known as master of expressive portraits and scenes of contemporary life.

This rich abundance of painting has appeared in towns large and small all over Switzerland, in carefully organised exhibitions. Also, commissions and purchases by the Cantons, the municipalities and large private concerns are giving artists a chance to establish themselves. It should be pointed out that, in the case of the commissions and purchases for public buildings and especially for schools, the authorities proceed in a spirit of open-mindedness, which gives every type of serious artistic expression a chance to unfold and to make its appeal to the public at large.

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IT HAPPENED IN THE CANTONS OF VAUD AND TICINO

VAUD

The Vaudois Council of State elected Councillor Edourad Debétaz as its President for 1966. The budget for the present year estimates a deficit of 6.8 million francs, revenue being estimated at nearly 441 mio. Road construction was a heavy burden last year, and in November, an additional credit of 15.3 mio was asked for. A fortnight later, the Cantonal Parliament granted another 22.8 million francs for the same purpose. The figure for road accidents in the Canton in 1965 meant that every 76 minutes there was an accident, every 2h.19m. somebody was injured, and every 61½ h. someone was killed.

Building projects for which the State is responsible, include renovating the laboratory for anorganic chemistry at Lausanne University, enlarging the testing station of the Technical Institute and rebuilding the prison of Vennes. The new nursing and midwifery training centre, a twelve-storey block, is now in operation.

In November, the first forty-five students were able to move into the new students' home in Bellerive, the Canton having made available the administration building of the EXPO. Alfred Corbaz is the new chief of the cantonal office for vocational training, and the new Director of the Vaudois Technical College at Yverdon is the engineer Georges Thalmann. The Church Synod has decided to create a theological seminary for future Ministers of the Church.

In December, a "Centre Dramatique Romand" was founded, aiming at stimulating drama and opera.

The Vaudois wine of 1965 is apparently about the same as that of 1963 as far as quality is concerned; the harvest of 29 million litres is above average. The official verdict is "a pleasant light wine".

In the middle of November, the elections took place in all Vaudois Communes. Voting participation was as high as 76% in one or two places.

During the last legislative period (1962-65), a total of 270 women were members of Vaudois Commune Councils, and in the new period, the figure is slightly less.

Last June, Federal Councillor Tschudi appealed to the Swiss population for funds to restore the unique remnants of Switzerland's first capital, the old Aventicum (**Avenches**). Over 11,000 men and women contributed, as well as firms and Communes, and Fr.600,000.— have so far been collected. Of the four million francs which will be needed to secure the old town only one-fifth will still have to be collected.

The firm of Bourgeois Frères s.a. at **Balaigues** celebrated its 175th anniversary in autumn. 1,407 delegates took part in an international study conference at the **Caux** centre for Moral rearmament.

The budget for 1966 of the town of **Lausanne** estimates expenditure of well over 163 million francs and a deficit of Frs.328,000.—. The President of the new Commune Council is Marcel Corbaz (Workers' Party). The Municipal President is once more Georges-André Chevallaz. The Workers' Party shows an increase of six seats and the Socialists' of three.

The Union Bank of Switzerland took over the oldest private bank in Lausanne, Bugnion et Cie, founded in 1803. A new evening school of grammar school standard has been started with a first batch of 119 students. The Hotel School in Lausanne is being enlarged.

The International Federation of Women Lawyers assembled for their congress in Lausanne last autumn, and