

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: - (1971)
Heft: 1618

Artikel: Villa on the shore
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688160>

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The Swiss Observer

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FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER

The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

Vol. 57 No. 1618

FRIDAY, 25th JUNE, 1971



Villa on the shore (1878) by Arnold Böcklin

A soft breeze. The rustle of cypress trees. A grey sky full of foreboding. A lonely villa with arches. Ruins and wild vegetation. A young maiden in solitary dreaming. Emerald waves washing on the rocks. The infinity of the sea. This wonderful picture is an example of what Arnold Böcklin meant when he said that his paintings were to be "dreamt about"!

Seventy years after the death of this important Swiss artist, the conjugated efforts of the Arts Council and Pro Helvetia led to a fascinating exhibition of works by Arnold Böcklin and Ferdinand Hodler. The above painting is typical of the best of Böcklin. It is reminiscent of his famous "Island of

the Dead", of which an example was at the Hayward Gallery Exhibition. Like "Naiads at Play" and "Calm Sea", it is watery, dreamy, mysterious and a little sad. The critics find it hard to make out where to situate Böcklin in the history of art. The Swiss art critic Georg Schmid, who apparently doesn't like him much, says that he is the burden of Swiss Art just as the Pre-Raphaelites are the burden of English Art. It is indeed surprising that an artist who lived like him through the growth and blossom of impressionism should have been left totally uninfluenced by this movement. Not all his paintings have this aquatic quality however. Many are stocky, robust and

Germanic. But most of those we could see at the Hayward Gallery, even the portraits, were paintings inviting their beholder to a dream.

Böcklin was little known for these past 70 years outside Switzerland, where he was born, and Germany, where he worked. This is indeed true of other Swiss artists and the Arts Council have seldom honoured them with an exhibition, although there have on many occasions been exhibitions of Swiss private collections. But Böcklin fascinated surrealists like Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dali. Oblivious of the trends of his day, Böcklin remained a mixture of classicism, romanticism and surrealism.