

Surrounded by the Bourbaki - in the centre of modern Lucerne

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Surrounded by the Bourbaki – in the centre of modern Lucerne

ANYONE who would like to experience the long, forest-fringed valley of Les Verrières in the Jura under a deep blanket of snow and a dark wintry sky need not bother to climb to nearly 3,000 ft.

He can have his wish with less effort, and for that matter even in summer, in Lucerne. To be exact in the "Panorama", the round building near the Lion Monument, where an episode from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71, the entry of the Bourbaki army into Switzerland, is presented.

The huge circular picture, painted just a hundred years ago and on view in Lucerne since 1890, deserves a better fate than that of a second-rate tourist attraction, even though it was commissioned for commercial purposes.

Panoramas, large paintings that surround the observer and thus evoke the impression of a real setting, were very popular in the nineteenth century, which was fond of operatic monumentality.

They can be traced back to the illusionistic theatrical scene-painting of the Baroque era. As early as 1737 "spectacles muets" were being displayed in an abandoned opera house in Paris, where the visitor could imagine himself, for instance, in the interior of St. Peter's in Rome.

City panoramas and reconstructions of battle scenes were also in favour. Special round buildings for housing panoramas

were first erected in London and Paris, later in other cities of Europe.

It was a Belgian company that planned a gigantic panorama in Switzerland. The subject was to be the crossing of the Swiss frontier by the Bourbaki army. The idea was good, for the event had left a deep impression on the Swiss, and there was hardly a town that had not had its interned French soldiers to look after, wounded to care for and dead to bury.

The Swiss painters Anker, Bachelin and Castres had all had success with genre pictures on the same theme.

After the defeat and capitulation of the French army near Sedan on September 2, 1870, and the end of the Empire, the provisional French government had hastily mobilized new troops.

Inadequately equipped and insufficiently trained, these had fought unsuccessfully but had been able to continue the war well into the winter of 1870/71.

The Eastern Army under General Bourbaki was ordered to raise the siege of Belfort, which had so far been unsuccessfully beleaguered by the Prussians.

It was defeated, however, at a battle on the Lisaine and was forced back against the Swiss frontier near Pontarlier. General Bourbaki attempted suicide, and his successor, Clinchant, had no alternative but to beg the Swiss to give his troops access.

They crossed the frontier on

February 1, 1871, mostly in the neighbourhood of Les Verrières. They were disarmed without difficulty, although there were only 3,000 Swiss soldiers under General Hans Herzog to deal with 80,000 Frenchmen.

It was not exactly a great historical event, and certainly no heroic scene. Who was to paint it?

The artist finally chosen was the Genevese Edouard Castres (1838-1902), who had originally been an enamellist but had then made a name in Paris with the genre pictures that were so popular at the time.

When war broke out between France and Prussia he had accompanied a team of doctors from the Swiss Red Cross as a first-aid helper. He thus personally experienced the horrors of war, and recorded what he saw in his sketchbook.

A painting in oils, "Ambulance in the Snow", which he later completed (it is now in America) attracted much attention and won a gold medal at the Salon of 1872. This was probably the reason why he was commissioned to paint the panorama.

The sound training in draughtsmanship which Castres had received in Geneva from the artist Barthélemy Menn now stood him in good stead. The difficult problem of perspective posed by the representation of a long valley on a circular canvas is extremely well solved.

In his colouring Castres reveals the influence of the



Impressionists who were now emerging in Paris – Castres was on friendly terms with Manet. The unity of action and atmosphere is observed despite the accuracy of the details.

The merely anecdotal never comes to the fore. The danger of the picture being broken down into individual episodes, which obviously threatens a monumental work of this kind, has been avoided, which is the more surprising when it is considered that a whole team of artists had to be engaged to carry out the painting.

Castres evidently had a recipe



The Bourbaki Army at Les Verrières, one section of the 'Panorama' at Lucerne

for combining various individualities in a single work. It is intriguing to stand in front of the picture and to try to guess which parts (and they are in fact known) were painted by the artist who was later to be the most famous of them all, the young Ferdinand Hodler.

The painted panorama required an unobtrusive transition to three-dimensional presentation as a means of heightening the illusion. Thus the last carriage of the painted ambulance train is plastically reproduced and stands on real rails.

The telegraph wires running

into the distance are suddenly suspended from a real pole. It is difficult to distinguish where the heaps of painted firearms end and the scattering of real guns begins.

The soldiers of the Eastern Army, advancing in several columns, are disarmed by Swiss troops, and the onlooker feels part of the scene – so real is the illusion.

Ambulance waggons of the Swiss Red Cross, which here went into action for the first time, are seen, and a waiting ambulance train receives the wounded to transport them into

the interior.

The line is the Suisse-Occidentale Railway, opened in 1860, from Pontarlier to Neuchâtel.

Castres spent the winter of 1876/77 in Les Verrières and made numerous sketches, which are today mostly in the possession of the Gottfried Keller Foundation and are deposited in the museums of Geneva, Berne, Lucerne, Winterthur (Reinhart Foundation), Neuchâtel, Le Locle and La Chaux-de-Fonds.

It helped the artist having been a first-aid man with a team of doctors sent out by the Swiss Red

Cross at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. And he knew the French Army as well as the miseries of war from personal experience.

For the actual events at Les Verrières he had, of course, to depend on eye-witness reports.

The whole panorama is most impressive in every way. The visitor will have a most vivid and lasting impression of a historic event of some importance.

The panorama has recently been restored and renovated, and it is open to the public from Easter to November.

Mariann Meier