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“LE VOYAGE PITTORISQUE”

Romantic Art in London

“To know, to feel, to understand the Alps is to know, to feel, to understand humanity. Poets, romancers, dramatists, moralists, historians, theologians, artists — all combine to give a special halo of charm to the Alps and the Alpine world at large.” It is not known when Frederic Harrison wrote these words, though there is little doubt that it was early in the 18th century when the superstition of past ages, which had developed the mysterious and forbidding summits, began to be lifted. The early travellers, advance guard of the vast multitudes who have flocked to the august mountains for the past century, did not have the power to convince their friends, and it was left to the poets and the artists to achieve it. The Bernese poet, Albrecht von Haller, published his epic poem “The Alps”, and it opened up the minds and the hearts of people far and near, for not only was he masterly in his descriptions of scenic beauty, but also a great patriot who eloquently praised Switzerland’s liberty as its greatest and most valuable possession.

When the reputation of the Alps and their scenic beauty began to grow, visitors became more numerous. It was, at first, mainly the Bernese Oberland and the Lake Geneva region which attracted the foreign travellers. The Lake of Lucerne and its surroundings were soon acknowledged, too, but only much later did the Grisons valleys come into their own. More and more visitors came, the wish to take away with them some souvenirs had to be satisfied by the, by then, tourist-conscious Swiss. Books on travel appeared in ever larger numbers, and above all, it was pictorial mementoes which were in demand.

That was the birth, as it were, of the minor masters of Swiss landscape painting, and many followed Ludwig Aberli of Winterthur (1723-1786), who was the first to make his name as a *Kleinmeister*. He invented a method of reproduction, based on the copper plate, which was copied and carried on right into the first half of the 19th century. His idea was to produce outline engravings in the style of etchings, which were coloured in the workshop to match the original. He was also one of the first to paint with oil out-of-doors, at that time considered more than courageous. The first Swiss painter to make arduous trips to the mountains in order to study them and interpret them in his work, was Caspar Wolff (1735-1783) who left 170 oil paintings. Other minor masters of landscape art were Johann Jakob Aschmann (1747-1809) Gabriel Lory the Elder (1763-1840) and the Younger (1784-1846), Franz Niklaus Koenig (1765-1831), Johann Jakob Biedermann (1763-1830), Peter Birmann (1758-1844) and S. Freudenberger (1745-1801), well known for his costume pictures.

Most of these artists and many more are represented at an exhibition at the Arts Council Gallery in London, 4 St. James’s Square, S.W.1. It was opened on 27th October and will remain on view until 25th November and after that date go on tour in other towns of the British Isles (see under *forthcoming events in the next few issues*, ED.). The exhibition was organised by the “Pro Helvetia” Foundation for cultural relations with foreign countries, together with the Arts Council.

It was Monsieur Béat de Fischer, former Ambassador in London, who had the idea of showing these minor masters in this country. His hope that it could be staged on the occasion of the opening of the “Forum of Switzerland” at the Swiss Centre in London has not materialised.

But the Arts Council welcomed Monsieur de Fischer’s suggestion, and the result is a very representative show well worth seeing.

There are some beautiful drawings and watercolours, almost photographic in detail. The faded loveliness of Koenig’s “Zeitglockenturm” in Berne and Lafond’s exquisite view of Scherzligen contrast strangely with the threatening atmosphere of Hess’s gouache “Stalvedro on the St. Gotthard Road” and the frightening aspect of Rieter’s coloured outline etching “Giesbachfall”. Lory the Elder’s watercolour of “Baechiholz” shows so much detail that even the inscription on the stone can be read, and the suspension bridge of his “Fribourg” (pencil and watercolour) is like the delicate tracery of filigree. Again, considerable contrast with the rather distorted scene in the Younger Lory’s “Chamois Hunter” with its unrecognisable peak. And so they go on, mostly peaceful landscapes, pleasing to the eye and interesting to the Historian with their wealth of minute items. It is mainly the mountain-scapes which are perhaps less accurate — the etching of Biedermann’s “Falls of the Rhine” are very quaint and clearly painted from memory. Where human figures are included, they must be very revealing to the lover of costume, whether it is Hegi’s colour aquatint “Haslital Schwinget” or Trachsler’s Zurich view “from the Kornhaus towards the Wassertor”.

Most of the drawings, watercolours and engravings have been lent by the Print Room of the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETH). It may sound surprising that a technical university should possess such a fine collection. Prof. Dr. Erwin Gradmann, Professor of History of Art at the ETH, who is in charge of the collection, and who came over for the opening of the London exhibition (the “Pro Helvetia” Secretary-General, Mr. Luc Boissonnas was unfortunately prevented from travelling by illness) explained how that came about. (See page 52664). When the ETH, the only Federal technical university was founded, the plan was to have a Federal University, too. But the Cantons which already had their own universities, objected. Thus it came about that subjects like music, languages, history of art, literature, etc., were introduced at the Federal Institute of Technology. At that time, there was no photographic material available, and every university had a collection of paintings and drawings, prints and engravings. Most of these collections were passed on to museums on the arrival of photography. But the ETH received gifts and financial support, and that is why it could keep its fine collection, second only to that in Basle.

At the exhibition in London, there are also some drawings and paintings, mostly oil, from other galleries and museums. Among them several impressive oil paintings by Wolff. Surprising is that an exhibition of minor masters should include a Barthélemy Menn who lived as late as from 1815 to 1893. It is the “Wetterhorn” and clearly painted at a time when men had lost all fear of the mountains, unlike Schellenberg’s “Ravine at Schoellenen” (etching heightened with white), which the artist himself described as “*Ein recht wild und schreckhaft Passage*”.

A visit to the exhibition is rewarding. It is also relaxing to be confronted with nature as man saw it in the past. Phillips Brooks said long ago “*It has all been splendid. The beauty of Switzerland is, that it has no dull places, and one is never tired, only sometimes bewildered a little with its endless attractions . . .*”