

# Arnold Boecklin 1827 - 1901

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## ARNOLD BOECKLIN

1827 — 1901

ROBIN IRONSIDE.

The standard response of enlightened taste to the paintings of Böcklin is still one largely of disgust. Such a response, however, is unlikely to bring his art into neglect, and even illustrates its abiding vitality. The fundamental bi-polarity of emotion is now a familiar concept. We are no longer affronted by the notion that hatred is a lurking component of our loves, and we may fruitfully assume that our aesthetic reactions, like our passions (if an aesthetic reaction is not itself a passion), are characterised by the same ambivalence. Where there is disgust, we may say, there is also relish. Indifference, the indifference of centuries is the only absolute test of an artist's insignificance, and a single lifetime is sufficient to disprove the validity of the mere revulsions of taste. Nobody can ever have experienced with indifference the impact of Böcklin's art. The recoil will be sharp, but the most sensitive spectator will be the most reluctant, the least able, to turn away, before he has savoured to the full the unpleasantness of the initiation. Visitors to the Museum at Basel, the most important repository of his art, can hardly fail to be impressed by the elevating realism of the famous Holbeins in this collection, but, unless they are inhibited by the tyranny of an indoctrinated taste, they will also grasp the opportunity of a plunge into the psychological cloaca in which the fantasies of Böcklin were nourished.

The power of these fantasies has at all times received a measure of admiration from the Germanic peoples. The enthusiasms, however, of which the Germanic temperament is capable, have not often been hampered by the restraints of taste. It is a temperament which does not recognise disgust as a reasonable or sufficient deterrent to the expansion of its sympathy. There can be no doubt that its independence in this respect has been richly rewarded. The expressionism inherent in German art has been the motive force of its peculiar triumphs. Though the *Galgenhumor* in which Germany's Gothic artists delighted may easily pall, and the crudities in our own day of Beckmann or Schmid-Rottluf seem more tedious than shocking, the art of Gruenewald, of Bosch, of Permoser or of Nolde is an irresistible vindication of the Germanic spirit's innate rejection of the problems of aesthetic propriety. Böcklin, at his most vigorous, rejected such problems wholeheartedly; and, after due exposure to the prescriptive phase of material distress and public contempt to which nineteenth-century artists were normally exposed at the outset of their career, his fellow-countrymen took him to their bosom. By the time his life was drawing to a close, his name had become a household word throughout the German-speaking world. The force of his visionary power was freely compared to that of Goethe and Nietzsche; Wagner pressed him to place his art at the service of the Bayreuth Theatre; and, on his seventieth birthday, national celebrations were organised both in Switzerland, the country of his birth, and in Germany. His posthumous renown inevitably wanted as the prestige of the Parisian school increased, but at the very height of the French

ascendancy, German criticism might choose to dignify Böcklin as a 'case' rather than dismiss his art as the expression of an outmoded representational ideal.

Beyond the frontiers of the Germanic world, the light of Böcklin's fame was never greater than a mere reflection of his domestic glory. He was a prophet only in his own country. He appears to have liked, even to have sought, this distinction. He never attempted to exhibit his paintings in France and resisted pressure from his friends to do so on the grounds that he had no desire to be admired by the French. This resistance might well have been the expression of an instinctive prudence, but in fact it is more likely to have been due to a dislike of France and the French, acquired as a student in Paris where he had suffered the worst afflictions of *une vie de Bohème*, unrelieved by any of its delights. In the circumstances, the record of contemporary French reactions to the painting of Böcklin is necessarily slight. A single article in the *Gazette de Beaux Arts* acknowledged the artist's eminence in his own country. His painting must certainly have been offensive to the average taste of educated Parisians, and it is much to be regretted that they were never given an opportunity of indulging their repugnance. A Böcklin exhibition in Paris at the height of the Wagnerian controversy would have been an interesting event. The aestheticism which flourished at that moment in France was not insensitive to the romantic appeal of *les barbares Germanies*, and in Symbolist circles, voices would have been raised in the Swiss painter's defence. Joséphin Peladan, the critic, or rather the High Priest, both of esoteric and exotic art forms, is reported to have given a little jump and a great cry on being confronted for the first time — in the Basel Museum — with Böcklin's art. This response was the spontaneous expression of amazed distaste and disapproval. Peladan, however, was something of a sensationalist, and after further contemplation, his initial disapproval was extinguished by a more powerful feeling of awe. His reactions certainly suggest that Böcklin's painting would have produced an eruptive effect in Paris, both on those who were irrevocably repelled and on those whose distaste was a premonitory symptom of latent gratification.

The conspicuous and the most productive quality of Böcklin's vigorous imagination was the power to visualise the world of mythological antiquity with such compelling verisimilitude that its imposable inhabitants, its satyrs, centaurs and tritons subsist, not as poetic accessories or even as suggestive symbols, but as hitherto unnoted, somewhat unpleasant natural phenomena. We may easily feel that Böcklin was a man whose instinctual nature was in a state of repressed rebellion against the pressures of civilised life, a condition which might in some measure be relieved by the harmless liberation of his fancy in the service of art. After an attack of typhoid in 1859, he endured a mental recidivation to a state of infancy, putting out his tongue at anyone on the street whom he fancied might be staring at him and kissing any others who approached him with a friendly greeting. He did no work during the period of his convalescence; and perhaps the passionate energy he otherwise expended on the imaginative re-creation of a primitive world in which half-animal, half-human creatures led a life of wild impulse, served to protect him from

atavistic displays of a less desirable kind. At any rate, his most effective pictures reveal an amoral lust for life, a blissful ignorance of those Saturnian sublimities in which painters' dreams of 'the morning of the world' are usually arrayed; and the motions of his fabulous monsters are more like the antics occasionally to be observed in an aquarium or a zoo than anything to which mythological convention has accustomed us. They may hold the attention at first as though they were something that had escaped from a fair, but the abandonment of their mood, their comfortable relationship to the surrounding landscape belies this impression. It becomes clear that they are disporting themselves in their native haunts, that they have, at all times, been on occult features of the landscape; and the lasting impression produced by Böcklin's peculiar revelation of their presence is one of disturbing strangeness, a strangeness induced by the absolute palpability of their monstrosity. A similar sensation might be aroused by a sudden awareness that our eyes had deceived us, that what, for example, we had accepted as a fallen tree-trunk, was in fact a slumbering hippogriff. Pan in the paintings of Böcklin is no more than a stone or a clump of reeds until the talismanic moment in which he turns his head to throw a baleful gaze upon the unsuspecting wayfarer, and from that moment the god and his dissolute satellites invest the scene with a rudimental energy in which man and beast participate without distinction or hindrance. The wanton frolics of the sea provided Böcklin with the ideal setting for the exhibition of this energy. The most persuasive of his fabulous evocations are conceived *im Spiel der Wellen*; and the organic plausibility of his satyrs, remarkable as it would appear in any other conjunction, seems a relative feat beside the representational triumph of his marine fauna. The Triton is the particular monster he would have wished to be. He depicts the ribald gambols of this creature with a degree of confidence and zest which seems only to have been evoked in him by the conjurations of the ocean. Its mate, the Böcklinian naiad, stout, pug-nosed, her complexion lashed to scarlet by the assaults of the spray, is a beast brimming with hilarious desires; in his idylls of the sea, the artist has mostly shown her at play, leaping like a salmon or heaving like a seal, but always with a human eye on the pursuing male, whose unabashed concupiscence is only preserved from impossible exposures by the fortuitous surging of the billows. Böcklin was more rarely inspired by the

repose of these aquatic beings, but the vision of a recumbent naiad furnished the theme of the *Meeresstille*, a picture which has been accounted his masterpiece. The massive, lethargic heroine of this work, gorged, as it might be, with fish, is represented as emerging from a state of torpor. With a somnambulistic gesture, she casts off the lingering effect of a disturbing dream. She is herself a disturbing figure; the menace in her eye might betoken the calculations of an unscrupulous sexuality if it could possibly be supposed that her appetites, of whatever kind, still craved satisfaction. In her luxuriant quiescence, she resembles a marine vegetable; she might easily, out of sheer satiety, become exanimate while we look at her. She is already the restingplace of sea-birds. Soon she will be at one with the flora of the rock on which she lies. We may say of her that she has been, in the past, a diver in deep seas, and there trafficked in strange loves. The reptile coiled about her rocky couch is surely the progeny of her commerce.

Böcklin was the master of a truly grotesque art; without lapsing into wit, without pitying or wincing, but with rich sympathy he was able to visualise the aberrant, the prodigious, the denaturalised, as in very truth the sports of Nature. Of this element of the grotesque in his conceptions, he was undoubtedly unconscious wherever it is effective. He made various deliberate essays in the grotesque vein, but the results were in each case feebly humorous. Böcklin's contemporaries revered him chiefly as the allegorical poet of classical antiquity. He did not refuse this homage, and it is clear that, in his opinion, classicism was a dominant characteristic of his art. It was under the ban of this conviction (in which there was no hypocrisy) that he rejected Wagner's appeals for collaboration. A discouraging representation of Fafner is the only Wagnerian subject he attempted. An incidental preference for the Greek myths to the Germanic sagas would hardly support a special claim to classical affinities, and the brute vivacity of Böcklin's mythological illustrations is anything but Attic in character. But, as an artist ridden by the time-honoured *Drang nach Süden*, Böcklin had a deeper reason for thinking of his work as an authentic expression of classicism. He crossed the Alps not only in quest of a land of lemon trees, but also as an uproarious *Landsknecht* craving southern wine and southern sensuality, and most of all, as an ancient Vandal, delighted at the prospect of indulging his primitive urges in a congenial climate. Such was the

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inner nature, as revealed in his painting, of his claim to classicism; and it is an admissible claim. Of course, the Italian air exerted the usual softening influences on the savage intruder, and to these we may attribute a group of paintings inspired, it has been said, by Glück, whose *Orpheus* was one of Böcklin's favourite musical compositions. They display, as a Belgian admirer has put it, a wonderful sense of the *eurythmie des sites amènes*, a wonderful comprehension of the *rêve hiératique que taisent les arbres*. The *Toteninsel*, the only work by Böcklin which achieved, and perhaps preserves, a world wide popularity, is the commanding expression of this strain of acquired refinement in his inspiration; the *site amène* in this instance bears a striking resemblance to the Island of Ponticonissi near Corfu, but it is known that the actual motif was the Castel Alphonso, Ischia — a fact which could hardly have been established from the evidence of the picture alone. Böcklin painted four finished variants of the original version, all of which are extant. The avenue of giant cypresses which divides the island at the centre is usually regarded as no more than a valley of the shadow leading to the eternal sunlight of the Elysian Fields. This interpretation suits the earlier versions of the picture, but the almost gracious aspects of the island at this stage vanish in the beetling magnitude of its subsequent formation. The development of the conception is a regression from the vaguely Olympian to the vaguely atavistic. The cypress avenue in the latest variant is a passage-way not to Elysium but, more probably, to the abdomen of mother earth. Among the work associated with the mood of the first two versions of the *Toteninsel* are *Die Gefilde der Seeligen* and the *Lebensinsel*, both breathing the serenity of Glück's 'Quel nouveau Ciel' and possibly inspired by the second act of *Orpheus*. Under the spell of such Elysian themes, Böcklin might chasten, without constraint, the impure vehemence of his imagery, but the pacification of the grotesque element is an impoverishment, and the surprising effect of reality in such a work as *Die Heilige Hain* is the effect, nevertheless, of a diluted, a censored reality, like that of a still from a historical film.

For Böcklin the artistic process was almost entirely psychological. His pictures ripened in his mind. The shapes were arranged, the colours blended, under the supervision of an inner eye. He rarely had recourse to the established ritual of the *croquis*, the *ébauche* and the *esquisse*. As a result, the purely plastic interest of his compositions is almost nil. It is probably true that, in pictorial composition, the abstract as opposed to the imaginative or conceptual, relationship of one form to another can only be harmoniously established by material experiment. On the other hand, there is always the risk that an artist, in the effort to requite his sense of pattern, will mislay the significance of his original idea among the improvements to his design carried out in preliminary sketches. At his best, Böcklin was evidently unconcerned with the 'harmonics' of formal composition. On the other hand, the disposition of the persons and objects to be represented, so as to stress, regardless of formal equilibrium, the emotive content of the conception, was an essential part of his procedure. It was probably, in many cases, intuitively accomplished; but, when accomplished at all, its value is manifest. The *Odysseus und Kalypso*, reproduced

here, illustrates this mode of expression. It is a picture admirably composed, but to expound the virtue of its composition in terms of plastic values would be impossible. The contrast between the figure of the hero darkly silhouetted against the sea and the pale form of Calypso relieved against obscurity of the cavern is effective, not in any abstract sense, but as stressing the different natures of the protagonists and establishing the emotional tension between them, nor is the eloquence of the composition in this particular in any way dependent upon the preliminary identification of the persons represented. Böcklin's aptitude for this kind of formal emphasis, his innate capacity for an almost excessive intensification of *Stimmung* were, unhappily, enfeebled by the cultural requirements of an environment in which his fame prospered steadily; the commissions for large-scale decoration which he accepted at the height of his career, were a waste of his power and the results attest his imperfect comprehension of the formal and intellectual difficulties of 'civic' art.

Though much of his strongest and most personal work was done after the age of forty the influence of success tended generally to adulterate the primitive exuberance of his natural gift. From the historical point of view, Böcklin belongs to that group of late nineteenth-century painters which included Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, Watts and Burne Jones, a group which remained outside the Academic fold, but whose art was exposed to the dangerous fate — as it then was — of public acclamation. They were artists endowed with a natural gift for the imaginative visualisation of the mythic or legendary past but, as success caught up with them they were driven by cultural pressures to expound philosophy or assist religion in the execution of large-scale allegories to which their somewhat hermetic talents were totally unadapted. As a student in Paris, Böcklin was at one moment reduced, in the extremity of material distress, to the basic expedient of supplying the publishers of medical books with drawings of diseased or mis-shapen organs. When we consider the mediocrity of the religious or ethical conceptions on which, too often, his mature energies were expended, we may wish that the profane author of the *Meeresstille* could have acknowledged the benefit and tended the influence of such a youthful discipline.

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The biography of Böcklin is a record, along

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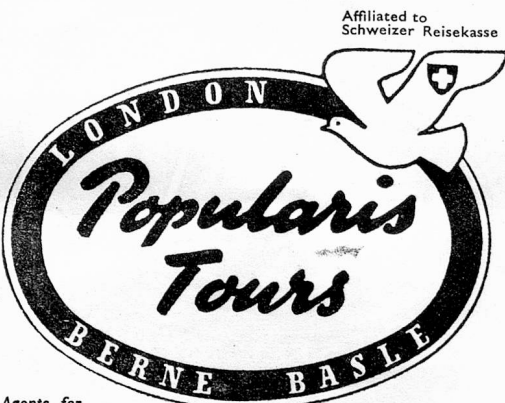
familiar lines, of struggle, perseverance and eventual success in the pursuit of his vocation. His mother supported his youthful determination to adopt the profession of painter, and the force of her maternal affection was proof against the scornful opposition of her husband who was resolved that his son should go into business. Her resources, however, were insufficient to ensure a subsistence, and from his eighteenth to his thirty-third year he lived precariously on the most meagre professional earnings. On leaving school, in 1845, he became a student at the Düsseldorf Academy under Johann Wilhelm Schirmer. In 1847, he visited Brussels and Antwerp. During the autumn of the same year he continued his studies under Alexandre Calame at Geneva, but removed, early in 1848, to Paris. The moment was unpropitious for a struggling foreign artist in the French capital; lack of means compelled him to return to Basle and in this case he may have welcomed the excuse. But he suffered no doubts of the reality of his vocation, and, in 1850, he was able to go to Italy where he discovered scenes and associations, a climate and an atmosphere which gave a lasting impetus to his imagination. Of the forty-nine years of life which still remained to him, some thirty were spent in Italy. He married, in 1853, Angela Pascucci. She was powerless to assist him financially and his economic difficulties continued until 1860 when he was given a Professorship at the Weimar Art School. Thereafter, his circumstances slowly improved.

Böcklin had only one aspiration which might threaten his progress as a painter. This was a desire to fly, and he was recurrently absorbed in laborious investigation of the possibilities. He had no qualifications for putting his theories to the test, but he was not to be persuaded, except by experiment, that the assistance of trained technicians in this matter was indispensable. He made two such experiments in Florence. A neighbouring hill, known as the Campo Caldo, was rented for the purpose. From it he intended to launch himself into the air and here also the necessary apparatus was constructed. The work was carried out, with great difficulty, by the painter himself and his friends who used such expedients as

most readily occurred to them for attaching the various parts. A sudden thunderstorm occurring at the very moment appointed for the test compelled the company to take refuge in a cottage at the base of the hill. The 'machine' may have been lifted from the ground by the violence of the weather, for it was discovered in fragments, after the storm had subsided, not far from the cottage in which its inventor was sheltering. Böcklin was not deterred from making the attempt once more. On the second occasion he was actually about to take off when a sudden impulse induced him to alight for a last glass of wine before leaving the earth. While he was draining this 'stirrup-cup' the apparatus was fatally damaged by a sudden puff of wind. The dangerous fragility of its structure could no longer be denied and the painter regretfully decided that he must abandon any hope of the practical realisation of his project.

Böcklin lived and worked in Florence from 1874 to 1885 when, largely for the sake of his children's education, he returned to Switzerland, settling in Zürich. His intimate friendship with Gottfried Keller dates from this period. He remained in Zürich for seven years only. Old age inspired him with a last yearning for Italy and, in his sixty-sixth year, he established himself for the remainder of his days in the neighbourhood of Florence. In 1895, he purchased the Villa Bellagio at San Domenico where, six years later, at the age of seventy-three, he died.

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