

# Switzerland's contribution to the european Heritage

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## SWITZERLAND'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE EUROPEAN HERITAGE.

By M. L. HERKING.

Basle, in the 15th century, was famous for its artists, some of whom came from elsewhere, as for instance, Carl Witz and Holbein. But there were others who were sons of Switzerland, for example, Urs Graff, "the painter of Lansquenets", who, in spite of his exuberance and sometimes even his grossness, shows the true talent of an artist in colours; he brings to life, with vigour, our warriors who belonged to the heroic period.

In their turn, Berne and Fribourg, can also offer us a particularly interesting group of painters. What comes to mind is the studio of the "Master with the Carnation", a collective name covering works, part of which are to be found in the choir of the Franciscan Church in Fribourg, and part in the Museum of Fine Arts in Berne. The painting by Conrad Witz of the Miraculous Draft of Fishes — which is to be found in the Cathedral of St. Peter in Geneva — is set in the very first landscape, according to nature, painted of our country, namely the Lake of Geneva. A similar inclination to paint Nature is also to be found in the studio of the "Master with the Carnation", and also in the works of Hans Fries, a pupil of the Master's, and more especially in the works of the Bernese, Nicholas Manuel, who painted not only "The Dance of Death", but also a number of oil-paintings, in which we see in the background of his mythological scenes, such as "The Judgment of Paris", inter alia, landscapes appearing somewhat mysteriously, lakes, and hills and trees.

To that generation, imbued with so much life and activity, there succeeds another which is far more formalist. The Reformation had put a stop to the impetus of painters by taking away their source of inspiration, so that the 17th century is a very empty period for painting. There are no noteworthy works which can be mentioned, except in Geneva, where, as a result of the establishment of watch factories by Huguenot refugees, a style of painting on a very small scale developed, which served the purpose of ornamenting watch-cases. This new kind of art required great precision, a very sure hand and delicate skill, all of which will be found later, repeated in the Genevese style of painting, the initiator of which was Jean Petitot, who lived through most of the 17th century. After serving an apprenticeship in Geneva he went to Paris, where he learnt how to paint on enamel. On his return to his home-town his art was followed by his disciples and for three centuries Geneva became the nursery for painters on enamel, who filled the world with their works, a great many of them going to China and to the Americas.

The Genevese artist enjoys going abroad. Thus it came to pass that Petitot worked in London for King Charles I, and then, in Paris, for Louis XIV; Jacques-Antoine Arlaud, another painter on enamel, also lived in France and in England, as did Jean-Etienne Liotard, who also travelled in the East, was in Greece and in Austria. He got in touch with Chinese painting, of which he loved the clarity and the sobriety. In his portraits, which are really enlarged miniatures, he strives to obtain as great a likeness to

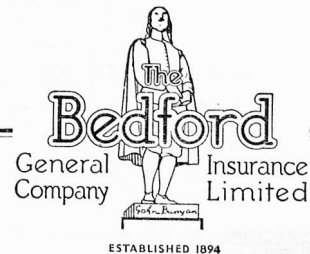
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his model as possible, declaring that "painting should be like a mirror." Liotard enjoyed an incredible popularity; he was in the fashion and he painted the portraits of nearly all the outstanding personalities of that time — the Empress Maria-Theresia, Voltaire, Marivaux, Mme. d'Épinay, Dr. Tronchin of Geneva, and so forth. With Liotard we reach the middle of the 18th century. This is one of the finest periods of our pictorial art, and it is now possible to speak of a Genevese School of Painting. This was to last until past the 18th century, with its qualities of craftsmanship bordering on the extreme. Yet, from then on it is no longer the miniature to which the Genevese artists remain attached; they now possess more noble ambitions; Alpine excursions are made fashionable by scientists and travellers; the time has not yet come for people to dare to cross the glaciers, but the artists, those of Geneva more particularly, are now going to try to put on their canvases these summits which are believed to be inaccessible. Pierre-Louis de la Rive, with his picture representing the Wetterhorn and his two views of the Mont Blanc, may be looked upon as being the precursor of Alpine painting, and will be followed in the next century by François Diday and by Alexandre Calame, both of whom are the most typical representatives of the Romantic art. The "Storm at the Handeck" and the "Sunshine effects on the Alps", by Calame, are works on a grand scale which reveal to us an artist who has been able to perceive not only the majesty, but also the beauty and the poetry of the high summits, in which the contrasts in light and shade are very striking.

There were also the two Toepffer — the father, Adam, and the son, Rodolphe — who acquired a reputation that was practically European, more

especially Rodolphe, who was an incomparable caricaturist; he is, unquestionably, the most spontaneous and the most personal of the entire line of Genevese painters, to which should be added the names of Firmin Massot, the portraitist, and of Jacques-Laurent Agasse, the painter of animals — particularly of horses, wherein he excelled — who settled down in London.

And now we come to our three great painters, Boecklin, Segantini and Hodler, of the second half of the 19th century, when painting in our country reached its highest peak.

Arnold Boecklin (1827-1902), of Basle, was a worthy representative of that town of Humanism, where, better than anywhere else in Switzerland, the Italian Renaissance was better understood. Boecklin possessed a very strong personality right from the beginning, and although he studied very seriously in Germany, Belgium, and France, and in Geneva (where he was a pupil of Calame's), he never allowed himself to be influenced by the various studios in which he learnt his trade; he noted everything carefully but he would only express that which was dictated to him by his poet's nature, for Boecklin carried within him a whole world of dreams. We realise this very quickly when we visit the Museums in Basle and Berne, each of which has set aside a special room devoted to his works. His "Isle of the Dead" in particular possesses a touching grandeur. Boecklin passed the greater part of his life in Italy, where the landscape with its rich colours and the warm atmosphere suited his romantic nature. His influence was immense, and one finds traces of him in two other Balois painters, Sandreuter and Stückelberg.

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Giovanni Segantini (1859-1899), who was thirty years younger than Boecklin, was, above all, the painter of the Alps, and one might even say that it was he who gave them life. Having studied in the various studios of Milan, he settled down later on in Maloja, in the Grisons, where he painted his first great works. He exhibited in London, Paris and Milan, where his pictures were greatly admired. He also possessed the soul of a poet, and his pictorial work, of a very personal character, shows us an artist who, when in touch with the magnificence of Nature, such as is to be found in the Grisons, understood all the beauty contained in the works of the Creator. His trilogy, "Devenir" (to become), "Etre" (to be) and "Disparaître" (to disappear), possess an absolutely unique power of conjuring up the impression he intended. It is indeed seldom that one is able to contemplate paintings which are as serene and luminous as those of Segantini. Since 1909 a Segantini Museum has existed in St. Moritz, which contains most of those works of the Master which were executed in the Engadine and, more especially, in the Oberhalbstein.

Finally, we come to Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918), a Bernese by birth and by temperament, who lived most of his life in Geneva, where he worked during his youth in the studio of Barthélémy Menn, who exercised a great influence on him. His first work is reminiscent of the French School of Barbizon, but by degrees he departed from this style and by the time he had reached the age of forty, he had acquired a style of his own. Although an excellent draftsman and a good colourist, it is above all, through the rhythm and the parallelism of the shape he gives to his bodies that he is able to obtain effects of an astounding power. Indeed, he creates the type of man belonging to all the ages — a type that is healthy, vigorous, slim and noble. Whether he paints only one or several personages, one always finds this compulsion to paint a man who is eternally true. His gestures are always those which express the maximum of intensity, and when these are repeated by a multitude of human beings, as is the case in his picture "The departure of the students from Iena", or in that of "Unanimity", he attains an unsurpassable power of suggestion. His works have been exhibited in all the principal capitals of Europe and his fame is world-wide. In addition to his numerous landscapes and portraits, and those pictures in which he expresses by means of symbols his conception of mankind and of life, he has left behind him works that have been inspired by our history, such as "The Retreat of Marignan", "Tell" and "The Battle of Morat". Hodler saw everything on a broad scale, and he suppressed all that might distract from the predominant idea which he was bent on expressing, and thus he became the greatest painter of frescoes in the first half of the 20th century. One should go to the Museum in Berne in order to be able to view, as a whole, the work of this painter of talent.

It would have been pleasing if something could have been said about a great many other contemporaneous painters, for each part of our country possesses artists of its own. The big centres are always Geneva, Basle, Zurich and Berne, but there are excellent painters to be found also in Lausanne, Neuchâtel, Sion, the Tessin, the Grisons and in Central Switzerland. Space

forbids more than the mere mention of the names of Paul Klee, the Giacomettis, Bièler, Vallotton, Burnand, Albert Welti, and so forth.

In conclusion one could not do better than to quote the following remark made by Adrien Bovy, one of our best art critics:

"When one thinks of the smallness of Switzerland, one may say, without any hesitation, that in the domain of painting, no other country is richer than is ours, at the present time, in artists of great worth."

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