

Marguerite frey-surbeck at 94

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THE ARTS

Marguerite Frey-Surbeck at 94 . . . still very much part of Berne's cultural scene

ON a hot day last summer I climbed the stairs to Margurite Frey-Surbek's flat in the Junkerngasse, the heart of the old town of Berne, to meet again a person whom I had not seen for almost a decade and who had been an inspiration in my younger years.

I found Marguerite Frey-Surbek more frail in her physical appearance but the eyes still held the old sparkle and her vitality belied the fact that she is 94 years old.

After lunch I was shown the latest of Mrs Surbek's works. Her unbroken power of expression intrigued me, and the clear, intensive colours and the contrast of light and shadow are the same as in her earlier paintings. Her special affinity for lithographs is evident in an ever-increasing collection.

Margurite Frey-Surbek is not only a well known painter — possibly the oldest pupil of Paul Klee still working — but also very much a feature of Berne's cultural scene. She still takes a lively interest in all cultural aspects of the city and is very much *au courant* with world affairs.

She always held with putting her beliefs into action. She was very active in the aid to refugees in the last World War, and together with her late husband, Victor Surbek, she sponsored many young, unknown artists. In the sixties she played a prominent role in the campaign to preserve Berne's Altstadt in its present form.

It is widely unknown that she also put her thoughts to pen. She has written a slim volume of her memories and impressions — "literary sketches" as she calls them — as well as published some translations of Italian essays by Piero Biancone, Francesco Chiesa and Alberto Moravia.

Margurite Frey was born on February 23, 1886, in Delsberg. Her father came from Basle, her mother was a Juras-



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sienne. She spent a happy childhood and well remembers her long walks in the forests with her father, who was the local forestry commissioner.

At home the family spoke French, the mother's native language. When Marguerite was seven years old the family moved to Berne and she and her four brothers and sisters picked up the local "Bärndütsch" in a very short time, although a very slight French accent can still be detected in her "Bärndütsch" today.

Her talent for drawing manifested itself at an early stage, and her parents were not too surprised when the young girl declared that she intended to become a painter.

She enrolled at the Gewerbeschule in Berne, but says that she was not a very exemplary

and conformist pupil. Her teacher, the painter Louis Moilliet, did not think it a good idea for Marguerite to waste four years at the college to qualify as an art teacher, but recommended that she should take lessons with Paul Klee, who was then, in 1904, an unknown artist.

For two years Marguerite was Klee's only and eager pupil and found him an excellent and patient teacher. Klee emphasised the importance of the inner structure of an object, following formal links and interactions and was seeking for new techniques, which later led him on to his abstract phase.

Subsequently Marguerite went to Paris for her further studies (1906-1911). She copied classical paintings and studied at the Grande Cham-

ière, the Académie Ronson and the Académie Marthe Stettler. Among her teachers were Felix Vallotton, Edouard Vuillard and Lucien Simon.

It was in Paris that she met Victor Surbek (1885-1975). The two young artists married in 1914, the start of a wonderful partnership in life as well as in art, each however preserving their personal style in their work. Together they travelled extensively and also ran an art school for many years.

Marguerite Frey-Surbek cannot easily be classified. Her paintings "depict". Her style, although traditional, is very much and unmistakably her own. Her mastery of the technical aspects of her art does not lead her to achieve a mere brilliant piece of painting.

She paints mainly landscapes, still life and interiors, in oil, tempera and watercolour, and likes the various techniques of lithographs and woodcuts.

The summer months are spent at Iseltwald, on the lake of Brienz. Although her days of climbing up to the majestic peaks of the Bernese Oberland — in particular the Faulhorn — are over, her love for the mountains is not diminished.

She has never followed a fashionable trend in painting, but has a profound understanding of the ways another artist chooses to express himself.

She is not an unworldly, idealistic dreamer and her *joie de vivre* is not based on naive optimism but on the firm belief that there is so much good in our world — in spite of everything — and so much beauty waiting to be seen and shown to others.

Marianne Hill-Moser



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