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Autor(en): **Hauptman, William**

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Charles Gleyre and the Swiss Fine Arts Section of the Exposition Universelle of 1867

by WILLIAM HAUPTMAN

One of the most interesting and least known aspects of Gleyre's activities during the 1860's was his participation in juries charged with selecting works for public exhibitions. This involvement is especially curious in Gleyre's case because since 1849, he renounced exhibiting his own paintings in the French salons.¹ Yet, with the substantial modifications in the selection of the jury after the Reforms of 1863, Gleyre consented to serve after he was elected to the task by his colleagues between 1864 and 1869. It is not known, unfortunately, how he had functioned here, how he had viewed his fellow artists and their works, or how he had used the power given him for selection.² In only one instance, but in another context, did Gleyre himself annotate his opinions, although briefly, as well the justifications for his choices: this was in regard to the selection of the Swiss representatives to the Fine Arts section of the Exposition Universelle of 1867, held that year in Paris.³ It seems that Gleyre was asked by the Confederation to act as the chief judge and organizer of the exhibition – but under circumstances that are not yet clear – and afterwards to write a report on his function.⁴ This document is remarkable in that not only does it provide a brief overview of Swiss art of the period, but it also addresses itself to some of the major weaknesses current in Swiss art from the perspective of a major painter who was indirectly a product of it and already recognized as its most important exponent.

Gleyre himself was responsible for 4 of the 5 classes that formed the Fine Arts section: these were Oil Paintings (n° 1); Diverse Painting, meaning watercolor, pastel, and drawing (n° 2); Sculpture and Metal Engraving (n° 3); Prints and Lithographs (n° 5) – Architectural Drawings and Models (n° 4) was not in his domain and he had no part in the organization of this class. All of the works were to be exhibited from April, 1867 onwards in Galerie I of the Palais du Champ de Mars, section G as allotted to the Swiss representatives.

Gleyre explained in his report that there were in fact two separate jury selection processes to determine the actual members who would exhibit. The first, about which almost nothing is known, took place in Geneva as a primary selection but without the idea that it would form the group as a whole. A final selection from these works was to be made by Gleyre in Paris in the context of quality and the availability of the actual exhibition space. Gleyre had apparently found the primary selection not to be as strong as he had hoped and consequently wanted to eliminate works thought by

him to be weak or which would weaken the overall exhibit. However, he was prevented from doing so because the space given to the Swiss section proved to be much larger than had been previously thought. In fact the Swiss pavilion, including all of the 93 categories of representation in 8 groups, amounted to about 3000 square meters, of which the Fine Arts section comprised only a small percentage. The space allotted was still only about half that given to Belgium and roughly equivalent to the space given to the Italian Kingdom and the United States. Nevertheless, the exhibition facilities seemed so large that had Gleyre utilized his right to eliminate the works thought by him to be less than the quality desired, the halls would appear empty. It is in this way that Gleyre justified in his report the mediocrity he perceived in the representation. He noted, however, that despite this initial difficulty, the Swiss pavilion proved to be impressive in regard to those of comparable size.

Gleyre also noted, surprisingly at the beginning of his report, that the weakest element present was in Swiss history painting. It must be understood that Gleyre thought history painting – by which he meant works concerned with aspects of historical, mythological, or religious iconography – to be the measure of the tradition of art since the Renaissance and thus the basis of any school of artistic thought. Gleyre's explanation of why the Swiss were feeble in this area was no less than a direct condemnation of the Swiss system of art education, a condemnation that springs from his role as a master of the genre and as the head of one of the most important private teaching ateliers in Paris.⁵ Gleyre wrote that Switzerland, unlike France, Germany, or Italy

ne possède ni ces grandes écoles de dessin, ni ces ressources de tout genre – musées importants, collections particulières, modèles vivants – qu'une grande ville seule peut fournir pour l'étude de la figure.

In respect to important museums, Gleyre was correct in enumerating this lacuna of large historical collections as a basis for artistic education. The museums of Geneva, Lausanne, Bern and Zurich were all created in the 19th century, the latter three only in the 1840's; only the museum at Basel could boast of a long-standing tradition of collecting. But all of these museums were essentially limited in their holdings through private gifts and a policy of collecting modern art by local artists.⁶ The works contained in private collections were at times rich in their holdings, particularly in Geneva, but they were not always available to students

for direct study.⁷ Gleyre himself noted in his first visit to Geneva in 1828 while he was a student that there were some estimable pictures there, but these were few and not always the best representatives of various artistic schools.⁸ Gleyre noted also in this respect that another element lacking which fosters history painting in Switzerland was the underdevelopment of “ces monuments publics, ces vastes hôtels où le sculpteur et le peintre d’histoire trouvent à excercer leur talent.”

A further remark in this context also bears brief mention: Gleyre wrote that while there is no lack of interest in public encouragement in Switzerland in the form of commissions, these are however too often left in the hands of private individuals or societies who favor smaller works of modest means. The result is that the artist has little opportunity in treating large themes or cycles. This situation was even true for Gleyre in light of his Swiss commissions, since by 1867 only one of his works (excluding portraits) came from public funds: the *Romains passant sous le joug* commissioned by the canton de Vaud for the Musée Arlaud – his *Major Davel* was financed by Arlaud privately, and the *Penthée* for Basel was commissioned through funds left by the painter Samuel Birmann.⁹ The situation Gleyre described here was likewise true for the Suisse Allemande as it was for the Suisse Romande; the situation in the Tessin was even worse.

Despite this harsh critique, Gleyre could nevertheless signal four examples of history painting in the exhibition which merited acclaim. Albert Darier’s *Adam et Eve* (n° 28)¹⁰, Gleyre wrote, showed considerable qualities; Arnold Böcklin’s *Daphnis et Amaryllis* (n° 21)¹¹ had a particularly brilliant use of color although he says nothing of its composition or subject; Weckesser’s *La Duchesse de Glocester* (n° 106)¹², a scene from Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*, was a bit cold in its conception, but still demonstrated “beaucoup de conscience”; and Landerer’s *La Noce du dernier des Ramstein* (n° 71)¹³, a scene from the history of Basel, had a beautiful sense of movement and local color.

Gleyre recognized that the true strength of Swiss painting lies in genre and landscape categories. Here Gleyre was correct in remarking that the Swiss representation was particularly distinguished, even, one assumes, in light of the brilliance of French painters in this area. Gleyre signaled the importance of Benjamin Vautier’s *Courtier et Paysans* (n° 101)¹⁴, which Gleyre said was widely appreciated for its treatment and expressive qualities, as well as Anker’s *Le Nouveau Né* (n° 1)¹⁵, which Gleyre thought “charmant” in the best sense of the word; he regretted, however, that Anker did not show other works of his which perhaps Gleyre thought to be of even superior quality. Of the landscapes which formed a formidable proportion of the works exhibited, Gleyre noted especially Diday’s *La Cascade de Giessbach* (n° 30)¹⁶, and Léon Berthoud’s five contributions.¹⁷ Gleyre likewise praised Bocion’s three landscapes¹⁸ writing that

c’est la première fois qu’on représente avec autant de bonheur certains aspects exceptionnels et précieux du lac Léman. La couleur

est élégante, le choix de lignes distingué et l’effet saisi avec une rare délicatesse.

In general, Gleyre remarked that he was particularly pleased that in these examples as in others, Swiss painters no longer only represented the grandiose and sublime aspects of the Swiss landscape only. He underlined in this respect the importance of both Koller and Lugardon *filis*.¹⁹

Gleyre’s views on the sculpture section are very brief. He praised in simple terms Caroni’s *Ophélie* (n° 5)²⁰, which showed a sense of subtle harmony in the handling of the material. Imhoff’s *Rebecca* (n° 7)²¹ was “un ouvrage correct très estimable”, but seemingly no more. The engraved metals of Antoine and Hugues Bovy were already too well-known as to need further comment, as seemingly were the enamels of Juliette Hébert.²² Clearly, this section, small as it was with only 15 items, inspired Gleyre little, as indeed the section devoted to graphic arts received little commentary from him. One work, however, was labeled a “chef-d’œuvre”: Frédéric Weber’s engraving of *L’Impératrice Eugénie* (n° 6)²³ made after the celebrated painting by Winterhalter. The works by the Girardet family also were welcomed by Gleyre for their technical expertise.

Gleyre explained in his report why the Swiss had received so few *récompenses* which were awarded on July 1 and published in the Swiss press five days later. Gleyre remarked that the international jury charged with awarding the prizes – the jury consisted of 28 members of which Gleyre himself was one – acted with honor and distinction, but the final results were disappointing. He had hoped to influence the jury members to award at least five medals, but he was able to obtain only three, none of which were for a first prize: second price medals were awarded in painting to Vautier, in sculpture to Caroni, and in printmaking to Edouard Girardet. (A third prize medal was given to Gottfried Semper for his project of a theater in Rio de Janeiro, but this category was not in Gleyre’s domain.) Gleyre expressed the view that Albert de Meuron and Léon Berthoud had merited an award each, but the former received only 9 of the necessary 14 votes, while the latter had received 12. The jury had demanded that, like with the prizes given in the Industry section, they be given the authority to award further prizes for the best efforts, but the request was denied much to Gleyre’s disappointment. However, despite these results, Gleyre told the authorities in Bern that they need not worry that the investment in the Swiss pavilion should be regretted – a total of 353,266 francs had been approved for all the Swiss displays²⁴ – since the results were well received by the public at large.

From Gleyre’s summary report, it is clear that the circumstances around which the Swiss exhibition took place was not the most ideal for revealing the strengths of its style and iconography. Yet, the overview is important because of Gleyre’s own observations on the strengths and weaknesses of his compatriots, which in retrospect seem valid. One can only hope that further study on the Swiss participation in other international exhibitions held in London in 1851 and

1862 – where, incidentally, Gleyre showed his *Illusions perdues* – or Paris in 1855 and Vienna in 1873 – where Gleyre again showed a small work – would reveal in depth how the

Swiss works were selected or rejected. Such a study would significantly increase our knowledge of the taste and reception respectively of Swiss art outside of its own borders.

NOTES

- ¹ On the nature of Gleyre's decision and its political overtones, see: CHARLES CLEMENT, *Charles Gleyre, étude biographique et critique*, Genève/Neuchâtel/Paris 1878, pp. 196f, and: WILLIAM HAUPTMAN, *Charles Gleyre: Tradition and Innovation*, in: Charles Gleyre 1806–1874, catalogue of the exhibition at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, February 6 to March 22, 1980, p. 14.
- ² The jury reports for when Gleyre served are in Paris, Archives du Louvre, but contain no information on how the individual members voted. See also: WILLIAM HAUPTMAN, *Juries, Protests, and Counter-Exhibitions Before 1850*, in: *The Art Bulletin* 67, 1985, pp. 95f.
- ³ For a history of the exhibition itself, see: JOHN ALLWOOD, *The Great Exhibitions*, London 1977; PHILIPPE BOUIN/CHRISTIAN-PHILIPPE CHANUT, *Histoire Française des foires et des Expositions Universelles*, Paris 1980; PASCAL ORY, *Les Expositions Universelles de Paris*, Paris 1982.
- ⁴ Gleyre's report was published in: *Feuille Fédérale Suisse* 20, n° 10, March 7, 1868, pp. 295f.
- ⁵ On Gleyre's importance as a teacher, see: WILLIAM HAUPTMAN, *Delaroche's and Gleyre's Teaching Ateliers and Their Group Portraits*, in: *Studies in the History of Art* 18, 1985, pp. 79–119.
- ⁶ FLORENS DEUHLER et al., *Richesses des Musées Suisse*, Lausanne 1981.
- ⁷ MAURO NATALE, *Le Goût des Collections d'art Italien à Genève du XVIII^e au XX^e Siècle*, Genève 1980.
- ⁸ CLÉMENT, (cf. n. 1) pp. 22–23.
- ⁹ For a history of the latter, see: WILLIAM HAUPTMAN, *Charles Gleyre's Penthée and the Creative Imagination*, in: *ZAK* 43, 1986, pp. 215f.
- ¹⁰ On Darier, see SKL I, p. 340. Darier had been a student of Gleyre's since 1863.
- ¹¹ On the painting itself, see: ROLF ANDREE, *Böcklin. Die Gemälde*, Munich 1977, p. 295, n° 186.
- ¹² On Weckesser, see SKL III, pp. 443–448.
- ¹³ On Landerer, see SKL II, p. 220.
- ¹⁴ On Vautier, see SKL III, pp. 364–367.
- ¹⁵ On Anker's work, see: SANDOR KUTHY/HANS A. LÜTHY, *Albert Anker: Deux Portraits d'un artiste*, Lausanne 1980.
- ¹⁶ On Diday, see: ALFRED SCHREIBER-FAVRE, *François Diday, 1802–1877. Fondateur de l'école suisse de paysage*, Genève 1942.
- ¹⁷ On Berthoud, see SKL I, pp. 117–118.
- ¹⁸ On Bocion, see: BÉATRICE AUBERT-LECOULTRE, *François Bocion*, Lutry 1977.
- ¹⁹ On Koller, see SKL II, pp. 185–188; on Lugardon *fils*, see SKL II, pp. 290–291.
- ²⁰ On Caroni, see SKL I, pp. 273–274.
- ²¹ On Imhoff, see SKL II, pp. 126–129.
- ²² On Hébert, see SKL IV, p. 208.
- ²³ On Weber, see SKL III, pp. 434–439.
- ²⁴ The sum was published in: *Feuille Fédérale Suisse* 19, n° 8, February 23, 1867, p. 217.