Arnold Boecklin: His Leadership Among Modern German Painters: By Amelia von Ende

All great art is constructive and conciliatory. It spans the gulf between the real and the ideal and welds truth and beauty into an entity, harmonious and imperishable. A De Profundis such as no poet ever sung, is Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, until the cry of a soul in distress is silenced and the dissonances of despair are solved in the opening bars of the Ode to Joy. It is an eloquent message to mankind, an immortal lesson to the artist. All great art is also the expression of the individual self, tempered by the experience of other selves and projected from the personal to the all-human. It unites the divers streamlets of the day that come to it from all points of the compass, quiets the querulous, pacifies the hostile and converts the turbulent into one broad, placid stream, that sweeps along in majestic curves from the past into the future, reviving old and creating new life along its shores.

Judged from both points of view the art of Arnold Boecklin deserves to be ranked with the great art of the world. His genius has issued as victor from the restless conflict between the real and the ideal, which in our time has been more violent than ever. It has called to new life the fair creatures of fancy that peopled the groves of Greece and the realms of romance. Phoenix-like, they have risen from the holocaust to which they had been consigned by rationalism. Vitalized into poetic symbols of reality they re-animate nature, which had been vivisected and sterilized by scientific analysis until it was reduced to a series of mere formulas.

We need an art which will reconstruct the old Pantheon upon the foundations of modern life and re-people it with new symbols. The gods of Greece are dead; but there are those among us who would see them revived. What else is the meaning of that fanciful fifth sketch in Richard Le Gallienne’s “Painted Shadows?” Perhaps we should not care to experience a resurrection of all the divinities of ancient Greece, but those among us who want the health, the strength, the freedom and the joy of living which were the birthright of man before he sold it for a mess of culture, will welcome to our woodlands and our brook-sides the good old Pan, who stands for
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all that was ours, when the world was young, with his whole train of nature sprites. It is a hopeful sign that this patron of the open should have found his painter in our day. Arnold Boecklin has given the old myth a new meaning and a new *milieu*. His works proclaim the all-human significance of the ancient symbol.

THE great artist was born in Basle in Switzerland, on the sixteenth of October, 1827, one year before Dante Gabriel Rossetti, three years after Puvis de Chavannes, a significant coincidence if we incline towards the belief that a law of causality governs the appearance of great men pursuing kindred aims, just as it governs the appearance of certain types at stated times in the process of evolution. Boecklin’s father was a silk manufacturer in comfortable circumstances, and did not favor the early manifestations of his son’s artistic gifts. For the versatility, which is inherent to all art in the making,—being but an unconscious process of selection going on in a mind bent upon expressing itself in beauty,—may well have given the elder Boecklin cause for apprehension. Instead of taking an interest in ribbons of silk, the boy modelled in clay, learned to play on various musical instruments without the aid of a teacher and gave other proofs of the intense activity of his high-strung artistic temperament.

As in the lives of other men of genius, the mother became the guardian angel of his youth. She was the mediator between the father and son, and when a friend of the former added his advice, the boy obtained the consent to study art. He went to Düsseldorf, where the landscape painter Schirmer became his teacher, and two years later was sent by him to Brussels and to Paris. If his drawing shows some trace of the influence of Holbein, with whom he had become acquainted in Basle, he certainly acquired some of his stupendous color technique from Van Eyck, Rogier, Dirk Bouts and other old painters, whose works he studied in the Flemish metropolis, while the weird and gruesome fancies of Wiertz may have stimulated his innate love of romance. In Paris, where he learned from Couture, Delacroix, and especially from Corot, he was deeply impressed with the life about him. He witnessed the revolutionary scenes of that fateful year 1848, and when his father failed in business, bravely fought poverty by designing menu cards.

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In 1850 fortuitous circumstances enabled him to go to Italy. Rome, cosmopolitan, international, has a levelling influence upon most modern artists. But the individuality of young Boecklin, sturdy, robust, the spiritual reflex of his mountaineer physique, was strong enough to hold its own. Instead of adapting himself to conditions around him, he drew creative inspiration from them. But at this very time, a period of fruitful development, he committed an offence impardonable in the eyes of his family. After an acquaintance of only a few days he married a Roman girl, an orphan, Angelina Pascucci. Fortunately the daring experiment was successful. Although the struggle for the maintenance of the small family that soon grew up about them, entailed much sacrifice and ceaseless cares, his wife remained his faithful and discreet companion for forty years, and even in this early period of their wedded life reconciled with his rash marriage such friends as Feuerbach, the painter, and Heyse, the poet, who were frequent guests in the simple home of the artist.

About this time Boecklin moved to Hanover with his family. He was to paint frescoes in the villa of Consul Wedekind. But his treatment of the subject, man in his relations to fire, was so foreign to all accepted codes of mural decoration, that his patron was disappointed and would not have him finish the task. Boecklin even had some difficulty in getting an adequate remuneration for the work, which is now in the possession of Wedekind’s son in Berlin. He went to Munich and there, in the year 1857, exhibited his “Pan in the Reeds.” The work attracted great attention. The rumor that the artist, a stranger in the Bavarian capital, was with two of his children lying ill with typhoid fever, added a human interest to the painting, and the sale of it was as much an acknowledgment of its merits as an act of sympathy with the needy family. Duke Karl Alexander of Weimar became interested in Boecklin, and as he had drawn Liszt and other artists to the town hallowed with memories of Goethe and Schiller, he appointed Boecklin director of the Weimar academy of fine arts. The assured income brought about another manifestation of the artistic temperament. Long interested in mechanical contrivances and an eager and profound student of the problem of the flying-machine, Boecklin devoted himself to his hobby. Even Helmholtz is said to have declared that no man ever came so near to solving the question as Boecklin, who had based all his experiments upon the flight of birds.
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When the artist returned to his legitimate occupation, his “Pan frightening the Shepherds” in 1860 won for him the warm appreciation of Count Schack of Munich, the poet and art collector, who henceforth was to have the first option on any new work from his brush. The works which were created within the next four years were “The Anachoret,” “The Walk to Emmaus,” “The Villa by the Sea” and the “Lament of the Shepherd”—all in the Schack gallery. The artist’s family in Basle was flattered by this distinction and when their own city asked him to decorate the new museum, they were reconciled with his career of eccentricity. But he was not to be spared the proverbial fate of the prophet in his own country. A Mr. Sarasin, whose villa he was also to paint, was the source of much petty annoyance. The arrogance of middle-class Swiss gentility irritated him. He revenged himself by caricaturing some of the councilmen of Basle in the decorative masks of the museum. He was in a grim and depressed mood, truly reflected in the works of the time: “The Ride of Death,” “Murderer pursued by Furies,” “The Ravine of the Dragon” and others. Rudolf Schick, a young historical painter from Berlin, was with him during the years 1866-9, and his diary is a valuable document for all those who seek to learn from the life and the precepts of the master. For it was Boecklin’s habit to give himself unreservedly in his intercourse with the young enthusiasts who had begun to flock around him, and his conversation was an inestimable boon to them.

In 1871 Boecklin returned to Munich, and here, when he had just recovered from a severe illness, he painted that famous portrait of himself, palette in hand, listening to the weird tunes which death is fiddling close to his ear. During this sojourn in Munich he accomplished some of his most significant works; among them “Pieta.” But Italy, the land of his sea, his skies and his cypress trees, was an ever powerful lure. He went to Florence and in the following eleven years reached the zenith of his powers. His conception of nature had deepened; the poetic idea and its painted image were evenly balanced; in the art of composition he had no equal. Only his coloring still brought upon him the censure of the trained and untrained alike. Even Count Schack, his faithful patron, hesitated about adding a new Boecklin to his collection. The artist had devel-
THE MUSIC OF DEATH

(Portrait of Arnold Böcklin in his youth, painted by himself)
MEDITATION IN AUTUMN, BY ARNOLD BOECKLIN
oped beyond his audience. Yet the work of Boecklin in this his third period is spiritually of a superior character, remarkable for buoyancy of spirit, strength and wealth of life. The “Spring Day” in the Berlin National Gallery, the “Elysian Fields,” “The Play of the Waves,” “Silence in the Woods,” each is a paean to Pan.

Boecklin’s was a fertile brain, but he did not produce with the traditional ease of genius. The birth of each new work was preceded by a long period of slow inner growth and painstaking conscientious labor. Often a picture which seemed nearly completed to his pupils, was wiped off and begun anew, because the painted image was not an adequate reflection of the poetical idea. This was always foremost in his mind, and to this is due the unity of his compositions. And as this poetical idea always centered in some relation of man and nature, the human figures in his landscapes were not merely “staffage”—living accessories—but essential elements in the poem he told with his brush. They were never detached from their milieu, as an accidental and foreign element, but blended with it, were a part of it. The woman given to autumn thoughts at the sight of the leaves floating in the water, is a splendid example.

Slowly the artist succeeded in educating his age to recognize the aesthetic truth of his conceptions, even those creatures of his fancy, which had at first been greeted with shouts of laughter. For it does not require much study on the part of the observer to see what magnificent creations, even from an anatomical point of view, were his centaurs, tritons, nereids, fauns, and even the much disputed unicorn in the “Silence in the Woods.” The admirable art, with which Boecklin has welded horse and man into one in the “Centaur Struggle,” or woman and fish in the nereids appearing in several of his sea idyls, is but equalled by the wonderful coalescence of animal and human traits in the fauns, particularly the face. Only a mind familiar with the facts of comparative anatomy and convinced of the gradual evolution of man from beings lower in the animal scale, could visualize such creatures in forms, so fascinating by their strength, their beauty or their ugliness, as no longer to appear grotesque. Before his inner vision the barriers between man and brute seemed to fall away, until both were but symbols of life.

In 1885 Boecklin moved to Zuerich, where he spent nine of the happiest years of his life in quiet, deliberate work and in the inter-
course with friends like the poet Gottfried Keller and the sculptor-painter Stauffer-Bern. At least five of these years have found a faithful chronicler in Otto Lasius, a pupil, whose reminiscences contain some valuable information about Boecklin's view of art, his methods of work, his judgment of the art of others, besides giving illuminative touches to the portrait of the man. Here also are some allusions to the tragedy of his old age. His sons, Arnold and Hans, had chosen art much against their father's wish and had become pathetic examples of the painful struggle of inferior, though pronounced talent, against the overpowering personality of genuine genius. But the master's attitude towards life was nevertheless one of serene acceptance. In the pictures which he created in this period there are outbursts of a Dionysian joy of living, but the general keynote is that of well-earned repose after storm and stress, of the consciousness of fulfillment. As he looked back upon the distance he had traveled, he summed up the impressions left upon his inner vision in that exquisite allegorical series, "The Arbor," a symphony in four movements, its final chord one of sonorous harmony. His last years were spent in Fiesole. There on his seventieth birthday he received honors from all parts of Europe; and there he died on the 16th of January, 1901.

NEITHER historical nor genre painter, neither landscape nor portrait painter per se, Boecklin stands unique in the art of to-day. In his earlier years, when the influence of the historical tradition lingered with him, he painted some scenes from Ariosto. The Pieta and his Biblical pictures properly speaking belong to this class. There is also a suggestion of the dramatic historical style in such paintings as "Pirates Attacking a Castle by the Sea." His mythological pictures, too, are links connecting him with those that came before him. Yet even they were created with supreme disregard for conventions sacred to the student of antiquity, for Boecklin held, that the artist should not imitate, but strive for a sincere expression of himself and his own sentiments. This was the aesthetic truth he uttered, which no painter who would be a true artist can afford to disregard: "A picture must be painted for the eye, and not for the mind." He was a painter of portraits, too; but even there he went his own way and produced effects startling by their deviation from the prescribed canons of art. Lenbach had been reproached
with finishing only the head of his portraits and roughly sketching in the rest. Boecklin approved of this and even justified the method of the old Egyptian portrait painters, who made the eye, being the most characteristic feature of the face, disproportionately large.

Yet he was no anarchist of his art. He acknowledged the power of tradition, which after all is the sum total of the experience of many generations, crystallized into a more or less definite formula. He called the attention of Lasius to the important part played by tradition in the art of the Renaissance. This tradition not being confined to the subject matter, but also to the technical execution, Boecklin was throughout his life a zealous student of old theoretical treatises about the different mediums, distemper painting and other works on the technical problems of his art. But old tradition was not to be the sole guide of the learner. Whatever modern science had contributed to the fund of the practical resources of his art, he was to make his own. Every painter, said Boecklin, should have a sufficient knowledge of chemistry to know how to use certain colors without destroying the others. In reply to his detractors, who reproached him with unwarrantably glaring color effects, he said: “What narrowness of judgment! Color in a picture serves quite a different purpose than in nature. Our picture is a plane; to give it the dimensions of space, I must destroy its character as plane, and to do this the artist has no means but color. Hence I must use colors according to their optical effect as they project or retreat for our eye.” No less elucidating are the remarks about correct and incorrect perspective, with their references to famous classical paintings.

In these conversations the man Boecklin loomed forth, great, rugged, powerful. Strength and sincerity were the keynotes of his character. Just and discreet in his judgment of others, but never at the expense of veracity, he did not condemn, but rather attempted leisurely and conscientiously to explain their art. The scholarly trait in his attitude at such occasions was the natural expression of his seriousness of purpose. Self-reliant by nature, his ambition was neither fame nor wealth, but the desire to create regardless of any considerations of reward—the ambition of true genius. He never sold his freedom or compromised with circumstance or opportunity. Such men are rare in our period of commercialism. With the possible exception of our own Whistler, Arnold Boecklin may be the only
instance of an artist who had the courage to stand between the two antagonistic movements, the art for art’s sake and the art for all, and be entirely and absolutely himself. Such men are not the founders of schools. It would indeed be difficult to name any artist to-day, who can be called a follower of Boecklin.

Yet the art and the poetry of modern Germany bear the marks of his genius. The poets, especially Gerhart Hauptmann, have caught a glimpse of the fabulous world of Boecklin, the fauns and nympha and tritons and centaurs, proclaiming the unity of nature and man more graphically than the philosophical subtleties of monism or the mystical meshes of the metempsychosis. And some have attempted to vitalize these dream-children of the Hellenic folk-soul, resuscitated by his master brush, into symbols of ethical truths. But none have reached the eloquence of the painter in that tragedy of ugliness, so pitiful in its pathos and so irresistible in its humor: Nymphs and Fauns. Neither has one been able to suggest in words the majesty, the silence, the unbroken rest that greets the boat drifting towards the cypress-grown island, which is the ultimate goal of life.

Born out of the brave, affirmative acceptance of life, the art of Boecklin presents no problems, either artistic or sociological. Others have been painters of still-life, of interiors; he is the painter of the open. Others have been painters of animals, of landscapes, of figures, ideal or real; he is the painter of nature, which is all in one. Others have analyzed and imitated nature; he has synthetized and reproduced it in images of vital significance, reflecting in symbols some illuminating poetical idea. And as the poetical idea is the cornerstone of the works of the man, who drew inspiration from nature, life, poetry, art, music, he becomes the protagonist of all-oneness in art, as he has been the protagonist of all-oneness in nature.
“DIANA AND THE FAUNS.” PAINTED BY ARNOLD BOECKLIN