

The underestimated genius

The Franz Gertsch Museum in Burgdorf rediscovers the Swiss painter Otto Wyler

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Hundred shades of white are shining in Otto Wyler's «Monte Forno», 1917

Aargauer Kunsthaus/Estate of Otto Wyler

Not only contemporary painting is booming these days. Also older masters fascinate masses of visitors: for example Goya, Pissarro and Caillebotte in Basel and Martigny or the great French painters in the recently opened new Chipperfield Building of the Zurich Art

Museum. Furthermore a thoroughbred painter who is known by people interested in art history at the most can be rediscovered in the Franz Gertsch Museum in Burgdorf.

The curator Anna Wesle and the exhibition maker Beat Wismer have ar-

ranged an intimate and harmonious exhibition regarding the artist from Aarau Otto Wyler (1887-1965) within sight of the most recent creations of Franz Gertsch. It is limited to 70 small sized odes to color and allows the viewers time and space to go into the matter of the progress of this quiet master who was definitely familiar with the international artistic movements of his time.

In spite of their coloristic abundance Wyler's portraits, nudes, still lifes and landscapes are subdued. Probably for this reason the Art Museum in Aargau that owns some of his principal creations usually exhibits only the "Lady in Kimono" that oscillates between art nouveau and Japonism, between Amiet and Matisse in its collection halls.

Therefore Wyler's works were gradually forgotten since the great anniversary exhibition in Aarau in 1987. Only an overview organized in Israel by Otto Wyler's grandson Yehuda Sprecher called attention to Wyler's multi-layered accomplishment characterized by some disruptions again in 2013, and an assortment of paintings was documented for the first time in a catalogue illustrated in color.

Fascinating references

The exhibition attracted a lot of attention in Israel so that the Tel Aviv Museum granted Wyler's symbolic portrait "Tall Young Lady with two flowers and birds" the right to hospitality for a full year in its high quality portrait hall. Since then an exemplary website that displays about thousand Wyler paintings in addition to documentation material was created. All of this induced art historian Anna Schafroth to explore the options of an Otto Wyler exhibition with the Franz Gertsch Museum that is specialized in painting.

Now some of the most beautiful Wyler paintings are brought together

to a dialog of art historic references: if the early "Yom Kippur in the St. Gall Synagogue" kept in blazing red reveals Wyler's preoccupation with the expressionism, it seems that the "Tango Tea in Paris" 1913 has already announced Varlin. However "Monte Forno" that shines in hundred shades of white almost suggests Robert Rymans monochrome symphonies.

The relentless directness of Lucian Freuds body landscapes anticipates the nude dated 1916 that is somehow unpleasantly direct at first sight. A little later Wyler combines in a Jura landscape titled "Heuet vor Gisliflüh" van Goghs brushwork with the contours of the Fauves.

In 1929 in Paris he painted in front of an African glowing wall carpet a half nude of Meriame Droz and shortly afterwards in Cagnes-sur-Mer a view of the city with colorfully glimmering walls that shows an assertive dispute with the color wizard Bonnard.

"The Bridge in Fes" (1934) that vaults in mild morning light in front of cubic interlaced houses and gets its structure from a web of earth tones influenced by Cezanne starts vibrating due to the green of a minaret and the small red stains of a saddle bag and a head covering.

A fascinating biography could be expected due to these color and motivic diversity. However there isn't much biographic material that could be entangled with an artist myth except Wyler's Jewish origin that could make him a protagonist in Charles Lewinsky's novel "Melnitz" and an early, successful brain tumor operation that definitely influenced Wyler's decision to become a painter. Maybe except the fact that he was admitted in the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris at the age of 18 due to his extraordinary talent after attending the painting class in the Aarau industrial school.

In the French metropole the painting of the Nabis and the Fauves that irritated even art connoisseurs in those days just as the fluffiness of the impressionism and the painting architecture of Cezanne whereby the exhibition in his commemoration in the Autumn of 1907 must have influenced Wyler deeply. He interrupted his stay in Paris in order to study in Munich for a few months, There he encountered art nouveau and celebrated the first success in the secession exhibition with the painting "Spring in Munich".

Square landscapes that sometimes remind formally of Klimt but in terms of color they remind of Hodler or Giovanni Giacometti came into existence afterwards. The Wallraf Richartz Museum In Cologne acquired "The Guitar Player" that is missing today from the artist who was 24 years old back then. "Aare Landscape" was honored with a gold medal in the international art exhibition in Munich in 1913.

Following this bright career start Wyler moved to the Engadin Valley in the Swiss Alps with his young family for a few years. There he delved into a world of light and color. He succeeded in magic mountain representations that were praised by the newspaper "Frankfurter Zeitung". When he returned from the glistening light of the mountains, the buoyant artist admired equally by colleagues and collectors settled finally in Aarau – far away from avant-garde discussions fluctuating between surrealism, objectivity and abstraction in the big centers and art policy debates in Basel or Zurich.

Being slightly interested in theorization he carried out public assignments and at the same time he found satisfaction in the plein-air painting. He composed paintings full of beauty, cheerfulness and harmony from brightly colored surfaces in the free nature:

landscapes as well as poetic nudes completely interlaced with the vegetation.

Exploring his own creativity

While more and more threatening news were coming from Germany, Wyler dreamt in the middle of the thirties in Morocco of a more ideal world – like Klee, Macke and Moilliet shortly before the First World War in Tunisia. In Tangier, Fes and Marrakesh Wyler went into raptures over intensive colors that echoed after his return in paintings of the Jura Heights that seem almost Mediterranean, in smoke blue city landscapes of Paris or brown red Mediterranean coasts.

In the years of war while keeping a packed suitcase within reach – as remembered by his daughter Zimira – he found new inspirations in the Ticino part of Switzerland. A gloomy landscape or a melancholically tinted nude such as "half figure in green jacket" (1939) seldom indicates latent fears. These seem to start only after the war in surrealistic visions such as " Rock fragment in the wood" or " Stranded goods".

They go through with Wyler's late work like erratic comets up to the last, uncompleted wood landscape dated 1965 that shows a certain closeness to Alberto Giacometti's web like paintings. Also in these bizarre and picturesque boulders it was less a matter of new levels of perception. In fact it was a matter of private obsessions and exploring his own creativity-just like today's artists.

Burgdorf, Franz Gertsch Museum, until February 27th 2022. The catalogue "The Most Beautiful Paintings. Encounter Otto Wyler" (104 pages, 80 illustrations, Fr. 48.-) will be published on November 14th on the occasion of a book presentation in Franz Gertsch Museum.