

Otto Wyler, 1887-1965

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Otto Wyler (1887-1965) was a Swiss artist whose work was conspicuously different from the major Swiss painters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These comprised Ferdinand Hodler, whose symbolist themes were colored by a life filled with tragic events, the experimental modernist Cuno Amiet, and the genre artist Albert Anker. Wyler was also unresponsive to the universal themes and allegorical content associated with the Northern romantic tradition, as well as to the glossy surfaces of the narrative realist style and the work of other Swiss modernists, including the canvases and bronzes of the Giacometti family and the colorfully winsome panels of Paul Klee. Wyler's interests were more provincial. His energies were focused on the wonders of nature and human temperament as illustrated by his many paintings of the countryside, observational pictures of the female nude, and numerous portraits. Aside from several trips to Paris, Southern France, Greece, Morocco, even Israel, the Swiss Aargau was to all intents and purposes his physical, psychological and emotional core.

The Great Outdoors

In the late 19th century, the Impressionists became the primary source for an independent manner of painting. They were radicals facing-off against the establishment as represented by the French Academy who favored a grand narrative content created in naturalistic and realistic styles. In addition to employing the technique of brushing fresh colors without restraint whilst neglecting lines and contours, these painters were instrumental in altering the convention of landscape painting, moving from scenes imagined in the studio to those produced as a result of working in *plein air*, directly in the light of day. .

Born in Mumpf, 25 kilometers from his home city of Aarau, capital of the Swiss Canton of Aargau, *plein air* painting was more than an obvious act for Wyler. It was fundamental for his drive to create pictures that reflected the views he faced every day. Walking through his front door or gazing through the large picture window in his atelier, the Jura mountain

range would appear in the north-west. As it were, thick woodlands and rich rural fields of the region would emerge at his threshold, and he could hear the river Aare rumbling along the old town. And in the cold winter months, as the fertile vistas disappeared, Wyler would face a desolate village enveloped in a grayish mist that would often conceal the pallid valleys of the high pastures and the pristine snow-capped mountains.

As his painting skills matured, Wyler was able to express himself in a variety of styles. His canvases, always coupled to truth rooted in vision and linked to robust color harmonies, never approached a corporeal non-objective style in which expressionist tendencies overrode all other aspects of his picture making. Throughout his life he remained true to his own vision, despite the fact that the modernist movement had gone through a major revolution: Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism and a handful of other “isms” culminating in the 1950s with the New York School of Abstract Expressionism. From the very beginning of his career he was unmoved by the spontaneity and subconscious metaphors introduced by the German expressionist schools in the early 1900s and adopted much later by Max Beckmann, Chaim Soutine, Jackson Pollock, and others. As a consequence, and only on rare occasions, did he veer from his observational skills, to time and again transpose his canvases into admirable, often outstanding paintings.

Trees are budding in the painting “Springtime in Jura” (1946)^{p.65}, the middle ground plateau with a broad swathing carpet of greens introduces the spectator to a vigorously brushed mountain in the background, painted edge to edge in an ambiguous range of warm, sometimes muddy, hues. Wyler, like Paul Cézanne and his seminal landscape Mont Sainte-Victoire, chose this particular Jura vista as his favorite pictorial theme. I mention two additional pictures from a similar vantage point: “Cornfields in the Jura” (1962)^{p.27} and “Hayfields near Gisliflüh” (1917)^{p.27} in which the foreground of the former consists of a branch of cropped leaves hanging listlessly above a panel of lavender. Energetically brushed, swaths of dry waving grass are topped by a pale blue sky looking down on a serene, level hillside and tilled valley; a personal expression of utmost optimism.

“Hayfields near Gisliflüh” deviates from Wyler’s traditional oeuvre. There is nothing pedestrian about this picture and it is one of the only few remaining in which Wyler expressed himself in a different way. This composition alludes to intuitive decisions that are unquestionably influenced by the palettes of the expressionist painters that Wyler saw on his studies and work in Paris and Munich. A raucously colored,

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Aargau, Mensch
und Landschaft in
Schrifttum und Malerei,
1959, pg. 119

casually rendered harvester and delineated lyrical forms seem to echo the chromatic techniques of Die Brücke artists Ludwig Kirchner and Emil Nolde, as well as the Blue Rider group of Wassily Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter, who were in turn, influenced by Henri Matisse and the Fauves. Cadmium red lines separating ribbons of green, coupled with a mauve and turquoise sky, ignite a composition that overflows with chrome yellow and orange, carnation pink, tints of ochre and scumbled ultramarine forms. Although somewhat more subdued, a second canvas entitled "Cement Factory on the Aare"^{**} (1913) nevertheless falls within the same painterly vein. The river, painted in turquoise and pale violet supplemented by white and cool wavy highlights, progresses slowly through the center of this composition. It separates a bank in the foreground accentuated by a range of angular defined, yellow boulders and a multi-hued floral grouping that glitters. Emanating from the factory in the background, three huge chimneys, billowing smoke, oversee a phalange of trees, coarsely rendered and strongly contoured in a flat reductive style. Similar, but more subdued, is "Boats on the River Elbe" (1911)^{p.39} in which several shades of violet play against swatches of green and red lines.

Visitors to Wyler's cabinet of pictures might think he was infatuated by a quixotic feeling for sunny light shining from cerulean skies onto verdant Swiss fields. But one has only to look at "Summer Landscape" (1944, Collection Aargauer Kunsthaus), a picture filled with ominous overtones, to discard this assumption. Seen from a high vantage point is a spacious valley stretching to the base of black mountains, and next to a dark grove of trees a group of tiny figures with a hay wain working the plain. The most threatening element is the sky. Like a John Constable, Wyler has filled it with swelling, rock-like, motionless clouds, as a rain squall descends over the laborers in the field.

With the same skills that Wyler recorded the mountainous summer and autumn vistas in the valleys and towns of the Aargau, he would also paint the snow covered Alps observed from the Graubünden villages of Ftan and Maloja.

Otto Wyler rose early one winter's day to witness the sun rising in a cloudless blue sky. In his rendering of "Monte Forno", (1917, Collection Aargauer Kunsthaus), a bland yellow tint provided a triangular halo for the ragged Alpine peaks rising 3200 meters above Maloja overlooking the Engadine valley. Wyler's painterly depiction of this tranquil snow bowl summons up blankets of white, powder blue and gray to cover vales and



27 *Hayfields near Gislifluh*, 1917, oil on canvas, 69x82, collection of Daniel Noser
Summer Landscape, 1944, oil on canvas 84x105, collection of the City of Lenzburg
 שדות שלף, 1917, שמן על בד, 82x69, אוסף דניאל נוסר
 נוף קיץ, 1944, שמן על בד, 105x84, אוסף עיריית לנזבורג

ravines cut by a line of evergreens. As if it were made of flesh and bone “Monte Forno,” swells and heaves between the morning light and the soft shadows it casts, generating as striking a painting as one could imagine.

The last time that Wyler brushed pigment onto canvas was in the waning days of winter and his picture’s title is “Snowy Trees,” (1965)^{p.75}. It is both uncanny and wonderful for, according to Zimira Sprecher, his daughter, trees, regardless of the season, had a singular meaning for him. They embodied the vigor of human kind and the essence of beauty, whether depicted as grandiose in full foliage, barren or laden with snow. In “Snowy Trees”, painted in the last month of his life, two hefty tree-trunks in the foreground of the picture’s surface rooted precariously in the silvery ground are set at angles to each other, their branches entangled. They form a tunnel through which one can view a thick, snow bound, woodland whose sheaths of over-painted white impasto pigment, accentuated by a range of pale cool tints, have a crunchy appearance, inviting the spectator, as it were, to stroll into the frame. As if he knew his end was near, Wyler inserted the sun in the center of the upper portion of the composition. A symbolic image, he painted it as a whitish sphere with yellow arcs battling against the odds of a winter’s day to emerge, unsullied, through overcast sky,

Action and Passion

Wyler employed red, a vibrant vermillion, or possibly pure cadmium, in several canvases as his painterly signature, or, as a way of calling the viewer’s attention to a compositional detail, an element that can be traced throughout his career. One can only guess at the reason why he chose this hue and not another color, such as a sensational violet or striking Kelly green.

As early as 1909, one notes in an Impressionist-inspired painting entitled “Aare River near Aarau” (1909)^{p.47} that Wyler has introduced a flashing red spot almost at dead center, most probably representing a woman’s skirt blowing in the gentle breeze of a summer’s day. Fifty years later, as a reminder of Claude Monet’s colorful fields at Argenteuil, Wyler painted “Wheat Fields near Stussigen” (1958)^{p.71}, in which he dashed off clusters of vibrant red poppies laid over a meadow of warm sepias. “Girl with Red Shoes.” (1960)^{p.68} one of his most memorable nudes was created in 1960, five years before his death. Standing coyly, akin to a disrobed dancer, the dark-haired model lingers in a ballet position displaying a

pair of brilliant red slippers, the only primary hue in the painting - this is the viewer's entry into the picture plane. To achieve this, Wyler employed a compositional practice of angular openings, placing the left and right shoes at right angles to each other, while the left foot is set at forty-five degrees to the picture's border; the right establishes continuity with the bureau, floor and picture frame.

Zimira Sprecher recalls that her father referred to his own use of this bright red detail and emphasized that it was, in some small way, a reference to Camille Corot who had altered his observational style by using spots of alien red in several of his bucolic landscapes on clothing worn by peasants and fishermen.

Additional elements or accessories in which Wyler continued to harness this vivid red in order to lure the spectator into the composition include a belt wrapped tightly around the figure in "Portrait of Jeanette Meyer" (1938); and a detail from "Young Swedish Painter in Paris" (1911)^{p.38} featuring a fire opal ring made all the more startling by a spot of emerald green placed immediately behind the sitter. When planning "Woman Reading, Betty Wyler" (1922)^{p.58} Wyler brushed two fields of the shawl's red fabric adjacent to a corrupted green shape and covered book creating a compositional map of two intersecting diagonals with the portrait itself poised in center field. Other examples include the sharp red T shirt worn by "Mohammed ben Hassan," a young Muslim that he painted in Marrakesh in 1935; and, in the same year and in the same country, the prickly red kerchief that envelops the head of a black seated nude in the painting "Hata and Chadisha"^{p.57}.

The fluttering flags in "Aarau Street, with Flags" (1935)^{p. 48} are artificially brushed simply because Wyler chose to keep the same tonal range for painting both in the pennants in the foreground and background. If one examines his palette it becomes apparent that the greens and all other hues, especially the gray violets and the viridians on the Medieval City Tower, are muted to satisfy one's vision for recording distant tactile material – all except the reds. Wyler was not an over-adventurous artist. He was a solid painter and draughtsman who was familiar with his craft and was fully able to absorb and translate qualities that advanced his own scrupulous mannerisms. Consequently, his use of the "Wyler red" remains a riddle, more than mere fascination with an artist's devotion to a certain pigment.



The Female Figure

In 1905-07 at the impressionable age of eighteen, Wyler spent a study year in Paris, the winter in Munich, followed by another year in Paris. Already endowed with a keen eye for form and color, he was introduced to the Renaissance masters, as well as to prominent 19th century romantic, realist and symbolist painters as represented by Eugene Delacroix, Gustave Courbet, and Caspar David Friedrich.

Of course there were also the Impressionists, Post Impressionists, The Nabis and the early 20th century Fauves. And not to forget Japonisme, although its source, the popular printmaking Ukiyo-e style of Hiroshige, Hokusai and Utamaro, had already run its course in France. But Wyler undoubtedly was witness to an extensive number of paintings

of this decorative linear mannerism that genuinely affected his creative thinking and subsequent works. In the Aargauer Kunsthau in Aarau, three figure paintings of robed females (unavailable for this exhibition) attest to this influence, and possibly that of Claude Monet and James Abbott McNeill Whistler which are most noticeable in the introduction of ornamental screen backgrounds. "Carpet Embroiderer" (1912), "Portrait of an Artist" (1913) and "Seated Nude" (1911) are classic examples of the latent Japonisme style. In the latter, Wyler combines a pale blue screen, decorated with informal images of fruit, birds and wispy fern, with a crisp, realistically rendered, seated nude whose muscular form is clearly defined by black contours. This solid, sculpted-looking woman is the antithesis of "Carpet Embroiderer" a near monochromatic figure whose face and one visible hand echo the dashed-off kimono-clad figures decorating the background of this painting. In addition, Wyler reminds the spectator of his distinctive red by painting a necklace in the same intense color. Most decorative of all is the background field in



31 *The Bather*, 1952, oil on canvas, 92,5×65
collection of Carlo Mettauer
הרוחצת, 1952, שמן על בד, 92.5×65
אוסף קרלו מטאואר



“Girl in Aargauer costume” (1913), supported by Wyler’s flat, minimalist handling of facial planes.

If one compares these early pictures with his nude studies painted years later, the Japonisme influence becomes more apparent. “Girl with Red Shoes” (1960)^{p. 68}, previously discussed, “Nude at the Window,” (1960), “The Bather” (1952)^{p. 31} and a handful of other canvases, including the brawny “Nude in Interior” (1938, Collection Aargauer Kunsthaus) are delineated superbly by defined angular planes in a skilled sculptural fashion. These pictures are composed in a conventional environment; the first two interiors bring to mind the model’s domestic location; and in the latter, “The Bather” the nude stands before a dense, darkly toned, array of green, black and turquoise brambles and bush. Here, this short, stocky, figure, whose undetailed head and shoulders fall into the natural shadows of the vegetation, is depicted à la Cézanne, both in color and anatomical rendering. This approach emphasizes forceful contours and

muscular definition produced by exuberantly brushed hues and tints of luminous calamine pink and viridians. Unlike the other women in this group, “Half Figure with Green Jacket” (1939)^{p.52} suggests a person experiencing the pains of anxiety. Unidentified, in a neutral space, the sitter is portrayed wrapped in solitude; pensive, alone with her thoughts. To interpret an introspective subject without projecting any sort of belligerence, Wyler paints her bodily skin tones with a cosmetic range of subtle, thinly washed, pastel tints from pale pink to a diluted grayish green. If one were to equate color with an emotional state then Wyler uses the woman’s jacket, a sharp chrome green, to project a feeling of envy, resentment and a Freudian sentiment of misplaced desire.

Friends and Family

“Portrait of Artist’s Mother” (1905)^{p.37}, a charcoal sketch on tinted paper was rendered by Wyler at the age of 18. It demonstrates his already mature approach and understanding of classical drawing, characteristics that fashioned this kindly three-quarter likeness. Dark eyed and tight lipped, this belle époque figure, with her high collar and typical Gibson* hair style, is captured by Wyler in a concerned and thoughtful moment. The muscularity of the face is achieved by a single light source that balances contour lines with a range of gray shadows and a minimal use of white chalk.

*
Charles Dana Gibson
(1867-1944) was an
American graphic
artist, best known for
his creation of the
fashionable Gibson Girl

Throughout his career, Wyler painted and sketched portraits of people close to him. In 1910, he painted “Young Woman,”^{p.53} a slightly risqué, yet aesthetically pleasing, frontal representation for which he employed a simplified palette of powdery blues, pinks and translucent white, highlighted by deep facial shadows. But more enlightening is Wyler’s use of an arc as a compositional device. Starting with the obvious rounded shape of the sitter’s ebony hair, one’s eye moves downwards to an opposing contour of the model’s chin and jaw which, in turn, is echoed in a long sweep from shoulder to elbow. This arc is repeated in the shape of her black necklace and, finally, by two comparable arcs of the woman’s breasts peeking through a gossamer dress.

In time Wyler expended a good deal of the daring he projected in “Young Swedish Painter in Paris” (1911)^{p.38} and “Seated Child with Flowers” (1918)^{p.32} and in several of the nude studies mentioned above. Two portraits in local color made within 20 years of each other, “Self-portrait with Jura Mountains,” (1936)^{p.61} and “Dr. F. Laager” (1956)^{p.}

⁶⁰ maintain a firm drawing feature but the application of pigment in a laden *ala prima* technique is over-brushed and opaque. It is as if Wyler wished to whittle the likenesses from the canvas rather than render them in color. Wyler's pictorial assessment of himself appears infrequently in his oeuvre. A self portrait at the age of 49, set against his beloved Jura mountains and the Aargau highlands, reveal him as a robust yet solemn individual. Straining to face the spectator, his tight lips and narrow eyes relate perhaps to his perception of himself as an estranged individual wedged between his interior studio mirror and the open Swiss countryside.

On rare occasions, Wyler would indicate, via his subject matter and their descriptive styles, that he could fashion pictures of a frivolous nature remote from the painterly landscapes, floral and figurative pictures that occupied the greater portion of his working years. Several such canvases illustrate this lightness, especially the frolicking "Ice Skating in St. Moritz" (1921)^{p. 54} and others created for the Jugendfest celebrations in the city of Aarau. Not only does a 1912 example highlight the event with an illustrative flair but it also signifies Wyler's attachment to Aarau, and Aarau's strong bond with him. In a painting from 1912 a phalanx of young girls, wearing frocks in shades of powder blue, salmon pink and lemon yellow, pass under a canopy of huge plain trees. Here, the sun's rays filtering through their boughs generate a dappled rhythmic design of flecks and spots on the earth below; creating throughout the picture plane a sense of buoyant optimism.