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CULTURAL CROSSROADS.

by OLIVER REVERDIN.

Switzerland has just been commemorating the centenary of the birth of one of the painters who has known, better than any other, how to express, throughout the ages, the spirit of the country: this is Ferdinand Hodler.

Let us begin with a few biographical notes. Ferdinand Hodler was born in Berne, of a poor family, which had to struggle for its existence. When he was six, he lost his father; his mother, a courageous, cheerful and hard-working woman, died when he was fourteen. These two deaths left a deep imprint on his needy childhood. He had to start working when he was quite young, in order to live, painting sign-boards, together with his step-father and then, later on, at Thun, little alpine landscapes, which he sold to tourists.

Weary of the mediocrity to which his life appeared to be doomed and confident in his genius, which, however, nothing had revealed up to that time, he proceeded, when he was nineteen, to go to Geneva. He did not possess even a hundred francs. Bravely he went forward to try his luck.

From the point of view of art, Geneva was, at that time, the principal town in Switzerland. A local school of painting, which had produced some very estimable artists, had flourished there for nearly two centuries. This school was original in its ideas, honest, and, above all, paying great care to sincerity in expression and fine craftsmanship.

When young Hodler arrived there, a landscape painter of great talent, who came from the Grisons and was called Bartélémy Menne, was at its head. The Genevese painter unanimously considered him to be their master. In addition to his talent as a painter, he was also a remarkable teacher.

Hodler presented himself to him, and put down his name for the courses he was giving in the School of Fine-Arts. Menne realized at once that this rugged young man, of a somewhat unprepossessing appearance, was endowed with an artistic genius, rarely to be found. He paid special attention to him, helped him, and formed him. At the price of intense work, it proved possible for Hodler, after a few years, to acquire an astounding technical mastery and, by means of reading, conversation and attendance at university lectures in the capacity of listener, he was able to fill in the gaps in his cultural education.

He settled down permanently in Geneva, where he died in 1918, leaving behind him an immense quantity of his works, comprising hundreds of landscapes, portraits and big historical or allegorical paintings.

In this work of his, which is truly cosmic, Switzerland recognized one of the most authentic expressions of her spirit. This she appreciated — and continues to appreciate — at its real value. The principal museums in this country, especially those in Berne, his native town, in Geneva, his home-town by adoption, and in Zürich have devoted several of their rooms to his works.

Hodler's origine is thoroughly Swiss. Coming as he did from the people among whom the ancestral virtues which go back to the times when the country

was poor have been maintained the most, he always preserved a great ruggedness of character, as well as a great force. This ruggedness and force, he learnt, however, to dominate; Geneva, a city of ancient culture, a city of great refinement, helped him to do so. It taught him to make his sensibility more supple; from it he learned to differentiate and to be sociable. It opened up for him the perspectives of French culture, thus adding to his rich personality, making it possible for him to discover himself, and then, later, to realise himself.

This blending of Bernese temperament and Genevese artistic education made Hodler into one of the most completely Swiss painters that ever existed. Within him are to be found various currents, external influences, and that original authenticity which distinguished as the artistic, literary and intellectual life of Switzerland, that crossroad of Europe.

The profound affinity of sensibility and of the artistic temperament which exists between Hodler and his compatriots is proved by the lasting success of his work. Throughout the entire country, in thousands and thousands of homes, belonging to intellectuals, as well as to business men, workers, artisans and farmers, you will find, hanging on the walls reproductions of some of his pictures; landscapes, representing the Alps, large, well built up, plastic and rythmical, or else views of the Lake of Geneva, possessing that admirable correspondance of sky and water which, in its duality creates a oneness, portraits of craftsmen in their blue blouses, of carpenters at their benches; evocations of the ancient military glory of the Swiss, powerful, almost brutal, but possessing an admirable plasticity, as, for instance, in that picture of the Retreat from Marignano which, once seen, can never be forgotten. This glory, of which Hodler is the bard, is not that of a sovereign, or of some great Captain, but it is that of the foot-soldier, of the pikeman, of the man in the ranks, and in this also, our artist is tipically Swiss.

It is only fitting to render homage on the occasion of the centenary of his birth to this artist who is great, not only because of the intrinsic values of some of his works, but also because he knew to be, and to remain, for the whole of the Swiss people, a truly national painter.

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