Kulturheros: Arnold Böcklin and the Image of the "German Hero" as a Reflection of Modern Society

Rebekah Gooding – Art History

School of Art & Design, College of Creative Arts, West Virginia University

Introduction

Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901) was widely considered a *Kulturheros* (Cultural Hero) by German society at the time of his death. However, he was not German. In a society that was becoming increasingly nationalistic and focused on the idea of the German identity, Böcklin, a man from Switzerland who spent most of his life in Italy, somehow became known as one of the most iconic German painters of the late nineteenth century. By analyzing how Böcklin was discussed in primary sources and how that discussion connects to his art, this research demonstrates how Böcklin fulfilled several roles in the social and political structure of the German Empire and explains how the German people were able to ignore Böcklin's Swiss heritage and champion him as a true *Kulturheros*.

Figure 1: *Self-Portrait with Death Playing the Fiddle* (1872), oil on canvas, 75 x 61 cm

Arnold Böcklin – Background and Approach

o Spent most of his life in Italy, only traveling north to earn money
o Held a deep hatred for urban society
  o Loved Italy because it was not as industrialized as Germany was and he saw it as much more connected with nature
o Disliked science and intellectual progress
  o Thought it distracted artists too much from creating art
  o Told his students to ignore theorizing and intellectual pursuits and instead focus on feeling and experiencing
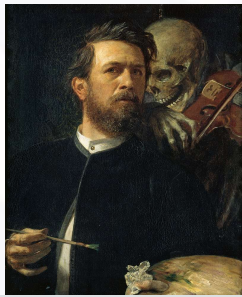o Combined Romantic views with Italian landscapes and mythological scenes to create intensely psychological works

Figure 2: *Nereid Game* (1886), oil on canvas, 151 x 176 cm
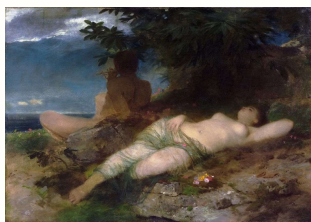

Figure 3: *Nymph and Satyr* (1871), oil on canvas, 108 x 155 cm
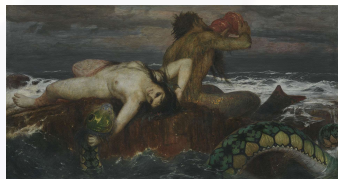

Figure 4: *Triton and Nereid* (1874), tempera on canvas, 105 x 194 cm

Figure 5: *Island of the Living,* (1888), oil on wood, 93 x 140 cm

Böcklin's Role in German Society

o Considered to be the German answer to French art
o Combined traditional technique, classical imagery, and progressive ideas
  o Appealed to the *Bildungsbürgertum* (educated middle class), which still highly valued classical imagery, but also valued progressive ideologies
o Provided an escape from urban society
  o Created a dream world where there is no evidence of modern society, just raw emotion/experience
    o Departed from standard mythological paintings, which depict specific stories (Fig. 2)
    o Turns toward more "primal" creatures such as fauns, nymphs, etc.
o Re-established the connection between humans and nature that people feared had been lost (Fig. 3 and 4)
o Played well into the Neo-Romantic movement that was moving away from realism and logic, instead prioritizing nationalism based on the image of the ideal society (Fig. 5)

How did Böcklin Become a German Hero?

Two factors created a great need for the German people (primarily the upper-middle class) to have figures they were able to uphold as strong examples of the German ideals.
1- The rapid shift in economic structure in Germany
  o Agrarian → Industrial Economy
  o Urban Population increase: 36.1% (1871) → 60% (1914)
  o Fear that the soul of humanity was dying as people lost their rural way of life and became distanced from nature
2- The rise of nationalism
  o Ascension of Wilhelm II sparked German competition with other European powers economically, politically, and culturally
  o Need for Cultural Heroes that can compete at that level
    o Richard Wagner (music), Friedrich Nietzsche (philosophy), Arnold Böcklin (art)
Cultural Heroes, like Böcklin, fulfilled both these needs as they both gave comfort in the rapidly changing world and were able to be put up against the champions of the other great powers in Europe.

Figure 6: *Isle of the Dead* (2nd Version) (1880), oil on wood, 38 x 122 cm

How do His Paintings Communicate This Role?

o Intense psychological effects
o Elicits primal emotions that fuse with nature
  o Bacchanalian happiness and tumultuous seas (Fig. 2)
  o Morbidity and sorrow and still waters (Fig. 6)
o Connected with the middle class need to return to nature while also presenting a traditional, aesthetically pleasing style

Conclusion

Arnold Böcklin embodied the escape from industrialized society that the *Bildungsbürgertum* longed for as they became paranoid that humanity was losing its connection with nature. Combining this escapist mentality with an aesthetically pleasing style, Böcklin became a *Kulturheros,* a physical manifestation of the German Empire's values and standards. These factors contributed to German society's ability to ignore Böcklin's Swiss lineage and facilitated his rise to fame at the end of the nineteenth century.

Literature Cited

Facos, Michelle. *Symbolist Art in Context*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Marchand, Suzanne L., and David F. Lindenfeld. *Germany at the Fin de Siècle: Culture, Politics, and Ideas*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004.

Sheehan, James J. *German History, 1770-1866*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993.

Disclosure

This is research which will be finalized in a 25 page paper, all conclusions and hypotheses are subject to change.

Scan to listen to music inspired by Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*