

EN

BIÉLER

DREAMT REALITY

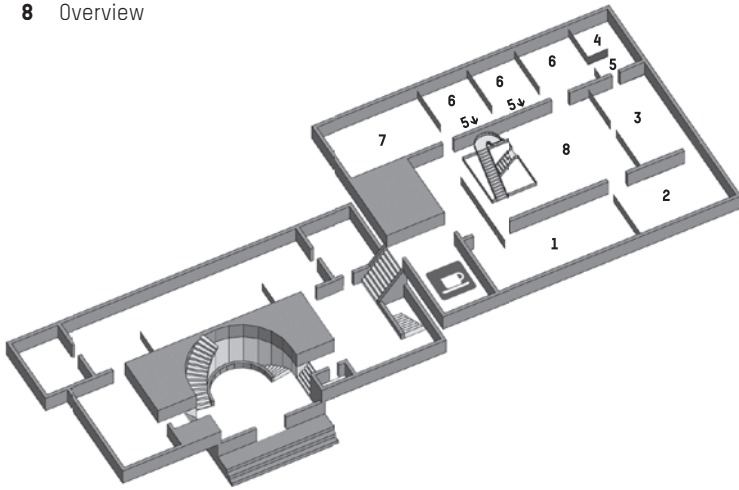
08.07. - 13.11.2011

KUNST
MUSEUM
BERN

EXHIBITION GUIDE

Exhibition Plan

- 1 Parisian Painting
- 2 Realism
- 3 Symbolism
- 4 Vintage Festivals in Vevey
- 5 Têtes valaisannes
- 6 Genre Scenes
- 7 Landscapes
- 8 Overview



Introduction

An artist's significance may be generally acknowledged, but still we may not know the answers to many questions concerning his biography and art. Ernest Biéler is such an artist. He is represented in almost all Swiss museum collections by his work and is greatly admired among private collectors. Biéler is a popular artist. We often detract from the significance of popular personages by hanging on to clichés. Biéler's depictions of country life in the Valais suffered this fate too. Because we now know answers to when and where he painted specific artworks as well as the details of his artistic biography, it is only logical that we can today view his work in a broader context than could be done previously. In doing so we are able to reappraise Biéler's standing in international art developments.

The exhibition in the Kunstmuseum Bern has been arranged according to the artist's stylistic development and his scope of subject matter. The show illustrates Biéler's sovereignty in dealing with contemporary art business matters. He was an artist who strategically adapted his art to the demands of various collectors. In Paris Biéler modeled his work not only after fashionable Salon subjects but also experimented with avant-garde approaches to art such as Edouard Manet's – staging portraits with an excellent command over painting and with great elegance (section 1). In Switzerland he specialized in typical Swiss subject matter. This he found in the village community of Savièse, then still largely unspoiled by civilization (section 2). In a series of large-format "exhibition paintings" depicting mysterious symbolic figures, he explored the ornamental scope of Jugendstil

1 Parisian Painting

painting, making a highly significant contribution internationally to symbolism and Jugendstil. For the first time in decades we are able to again exhibit two pivotal symbolist works *Les Feuilles mortes* and *Les Sources* together after both large-format paintings were comprehensively restored (section 3). Our visitors can find out about Biéler's contribution to the vintage festival of 1927 in a short film (section 4), while the next rooms of the exhibition show the multifaceted nature of the renowned artist. We are presenting his real paradise in rural Savièse and his stylized representations of the country people of the Valais district (section 6). Integral to this are his focus on portraits (section 5) and his landscapes (section 7). Simultaneously it can be observed how Biéler's art develops from a linear to an increasingly painterly style in his mature work.

The exhibition is showing a representative overview of Biéler's art. We are proud to present many pictures for the first time again after being hidden from public view for generations. Furthermore, pieces by the artist from the different areas he worked in, such as stained glass windows and decorative works (section 8), have been included in the presentation.

Ernest Biéler was born July 30, 1863 in Rolle. He was the third of ten children. His father, Samuel Biéler, was a veterinary surgeon, and his mother, Nathalie Caroline Jeannette de Butzow, the daughter of a Polish diplomat. The bourgeois family moved to Lausanne where Ernest Biéler grew up. His mother gave lessons in flower painting and taught her son Ernest how to draw. During his summer holidays in 1880 in Frenières-sur-Bex he painted landscapes (cat. 1). Ernest Biéler began to study art in Paris in the fall of 1880 at the age of seventeen. His teachers at the Académie Julian were Jules-Joseph Lefebvre and Gustave Boulanger, and he studied at the Atelier Suisse as well as at the Académie Colarossi. He copied artworks in the Louvre and executed sketches and water colors in the streets, on the quays, and in Paris's gardens. In the summer of 1884 Biéler toured Switzerland. During his stay in Sitten, Raphael Ritz recommended that he go to Savièse. Years later Biéler described his first impressions of Savièse: "[...] I will never forget the impact of the lighting and the impressions left by this spontaneous visit [...]."

Before returning to settle in Switzerland for the first time in 1892, Biéler picked up various artistic – officially sanctioned and avant-garde – styles in Paris, displaying a brilliant mastery in both. He painted like Edouard Manet and at the same time produced paintings in a polished photographic naturalistic style typical for the Salon. When merely twenty-two years old in 1885, he produced the pastel drawing *Portrait de Nathalie Biéler, sœur de l'artiste* (Portrait of Nathalie Biéler, the artist's sister) (cat. 4). It is a daring feat, outstanding on

2 Realism

account of its painterly spontaneity and compositional ingenuity, while highly persuasive in its psychological rendering of the sitter. However, Biéler made his breakthrough with the 1886 large-format painting *Devant l'église de Saint-Germain à Savièse* (Before the church of Saint-Germain in Savièse) (cat. 6). A Protestant himself, he chose a scene of general religiosity in Savièse where the inhabitants were largely Catholic. Biéler was more concerned with representing kinds of people than portraying individuals. It is remarkable how the artist refrained from using narrative elements and Christian cultic objects, not to mention his very reductive treatment of figures' individual characteristics. Without the title the scene could just as easily be interpreted as being a non-religious event. The women in their Sunday best could be attending some gathering or any kind of celebration, while the church door, devoid of ornament, could just as well be that of some townhouse.

After 1900 Biéler spent increasingly more time in Savièse, where he had a studio built. The fact that he sought a retreat in Valais has an art-historical context. In the 19th century the impact of industrialization resulted in massive changes throughout Europe. As artists became aware of the transition from agrarian to industrial society and its negative repercussions they fostered a worldview reinstating lost values, where harmony existed between humankind and nature. They imagined that such a world still existed in rural regions and sought physical refuge there. The authenticity they were searching for was found, in Paul Gauguin's case, in Tahiti; in Fritz Mackensen's, Hans am Ende's, and Otto Modersohn's in Worpswede, Germany. In Switzerland many artists sought the remoteness of the Alps: Giovanni Segantini and Giovanni Giacometti in Engadine, Biéler in Valais.

Between 1901 and 1904 Biéler painted large-format realistic genre scenes. In them he used warm hues, building up an impasto effect with broad brushstrokes. Biéler's genre scenes in no way hide the unpolished character of the mountain people in the Valais nor their emotional reserve. In 1901 he painted *Les Vieux à l'enterrement* (The Aged Attending the Funeral) (cat. 26). The carefully composed painting presents five aged men in a line who, dressed in coarse woolen cloth, walk from the right to the left through the picture. Three of them hold lighted candles in their hands or rosary beads. They all stare blankly straight ahead without looking at the beholder. The painting underscores the different expressions of the mountain

3 Symbolism

dwellers and the spirituality of the scene. In the background we see a mountain range of the Valais.

The painting of five singing Savièse girls in traditional dress, *Chansons de Savièse* (Songs from Savièse) (cat. 13), was executed using studies the artist made on location. He then arranged them in a composition with an ornamental background composed of pumpkin flowers and leaves. Bieler alleviated his solid realism with its focus on the typical by introducing floral arabesques to frame the country maidens.

Biélers preoccupation with ornamentation extended from 1898 onwards to the arts and crafts. He carved a chest with two fighting billy goats (cat. 16), as well as three chairs (cat. 17, 18, 24) with floral decorations. And around 1901 he produced six woodcuts (cat. 27, 28) in which he exclusively depicted women or young girls from Savièse.

From 1897 to 1900 Biéler produced symbolist paintings and decorative works, culminating in *Les Feuilles mortes* (The Dead Leaves) from 1899 and *Les Sources* (The Spring) from 1900, both of which belong to the Kunstmuseum Bern. They are programmatic pictures addressing the general themes of time while simultaneously manifesting the general themes of Jugendstil's purely decorative aspirations.

A painting with several figures, *Les Feuilles mortes* (cat. 19) is an allegory of autumn. Dramatic movement characterizes the composition presenting the main scene simultaneously with subscenes. The dancing group of whirling figures in the center seems to be seized by a centrifugal force. Billowing garments swell to unite the women dancing in a circle into a single rotating body. Typical for Biéler's style is the way the figures fill the frames, leaving little space for the background. If the swirling and bent figures stood upright, the space within the narrow frame would be insufficient. Behind the group of dancers further women crouch on the ground in separate circles after having finished dancing. Additionally two women lie respectively to the left and right of the main group. Asleep, they draw up their knees at right angles to their bodies and stretch out their arms. Leaves eddy in the air or lie scattered on the ground, building a decorative plane that unites the group of figures. Such groups of figures dancing in circles often cropped up as a motif in symbolist art, visually illustrating commitment to a common goal with its cosmic ideal form. The fact that Biéler avoided painting individualized facial

Vintage Festivals in Vevey

and bodily traits reveals his primarily decorative objectives: He gave priority to graphic structure and the overall ornamental composition. He staged autumn in a surprisingly unconventional way as far as the content is concerned. Autumn leaves usually symbolize the end of the life cycle; they are harbingers of death. Rather than underscoring the morbidity of life's transitoriness, Biéler presented an ecstatic dancing ceremony.

With its symmetrical grouping of allegorical figures, the painting *Les Sources* (The Spring) (cat. 22) presents a panorama frieze analogous to *Les Feuilles mortes*. But instead of dynamism and action Biéler evokes a mood of peaceful inertia. It is obvious that he was thinking of a series of the seasons with these two works. If this was the case, following the dead leaves of autumn, *Les Sources* would be another painting in the series and represent summer. Before completing the series, however, he apparently discarded the idea. *Les Sources* interprets the iconography of the seasons differently to traditional notions thereof. It doesn't evoke heat and the bright light of the midday sun during harvest. Instead we see women in a secret place in the fading light of the sun. They are dressed in flowing garments and undulating veils that a breeze seems to blow – strangely enough – symmetrically in opposite directions. Women meditate in groups on either side of the water gushing out of the rock, while cliffs close off the scene from behind. The figures are ornamental and grouped strictly symmetrical.

A parade is represented for the Vintage Festival in Vevey approximately every 25 years; it is structured according to the change of seasons in working the fields, taking care of livestock, and tending the vineyards. Biéler composed the 1905 vintage festival album, which was published by Säuberlin & Pfeiffer in Vevey. In it we find a folder – likewise designed by Biéler – containing sixteen chromo-typographies (cat. 40). In the exhibition we are showing the study of a leaf (cat. 36) and three original water-color washes that are double the size. Biéler didn't depict the individual groups as they appeared in the parade and instead presented the actors in their natural surroundings. He thus illustrated the hay and grape harvest (cat. 37, 38) as well as dancing bacchantes (cat. 39).

For the 1927 vintage festival Biéler made a substantial contribution. He designed the costumes, the wagons, and the decorations. He foresaw costumes in the style of the ancient Greeks and in the typical dress of the canton of Vaud towards the end of the 18th century. A total of 17 wagons were built under his supervision and according to his designs. As a background to the horseshoe-shaped arena he chose to display the fortifications of a medieval town with three gates, towers, and a walkway behind the battlements. The program of the parade contained the arrival of the soldiers of honor and the "Schweizerkorps", followed by the appearance of the four seasons: winter with the wedding group, spring with the goddess Pales, summer with the goddess Ceres, and autumn with the god Bacchus, all of which was accompanied by singing and dancing. The 1927 film

excerpt gives a good impression of the festival, and its great variety of color is illustrated by the costume design sketches (cat. 102-104). Furthermore, Biéler executed the drawings for the vintage festival album published by Klausfelder and Payot. The album is in the form of a seven-meter long leaflet folded like an accordion. The different groups in the parade are depicted on it (cat. 105).

From 1906 onwards Biéler's painting stands out on account of its clear-cut use of lines, outlines, and light-colored areas. In this style the overall decorative effect dominated representation in his art. His graphic style asserted itself in small water colors portraying heads of Savièse villagers. The formats or segments making up the compositions of these paintings are primarily presented in small formats and mostly square. Beholders are directly confronted with the faces because of their disposition within the frames. A contemporary critic wrote: "Rather than being portraits, these paintings represent character studies. Simple drawings enhanced with water color, they are filled with energy and possess a compact clarity, giving us the impression that we are gazing at colored woodcuts. Mr. Biéler, residing in Savièse – above Sitten on a high plateau in the Valais – only had to open his eyes in order to discover such peculiar and typical village characters, whose somewhat unusual features he portrays as they are."

He did not have to wait long for their success. The Kunstmuseum Basel purchased, among other works, *Le Forgeron* (The Blacksmith) (cat. 45) in September 1906. Even though the heads of country people probably inspired him to work in this style, Biéler also took it up when he painted portraits of his parents in the same year (cat. 43, 44). The purchases of the Kunstmuseum Basel motivated Biéler to launch a series of exhibitions and continue working in the new style. Its emphasis on lines and planes underscores the decorative impact of his paintings. He additionally worked with tempera (cat. 66), striving to attain "more uniform surfaces and intense colors."

7 Landscapes

Biéler's quest for tradition and naturalness bears fruit especially in his depictions of everyday life in which certain details are transformed into decorative elements. In this respect Biéler attributed special significance to traditional dress – which, by means of staging, he elevated to the level of sublime festivity. While working in this manner he was also engaged with universal themes such as the ages of man in *Mère et enfant* (Mother and Child) (cat. 52).

Slowly but steadily Biéler adopted a new style that prevailed in the end. Colored areas supersede lines, and he no longer accentuated outlines. This can be discerned most clearly in the folds of garments and in faces. They are no longer defined by single lines but perceived as fields of color (cat. 97, 126).

The ornamental impression in its totality is highlighted by wooden frames that the artist designed himself. Although functional and simple, they are valuable and independent works of art in themselves, heightening the impression that we are looking through a window into a lost world (cat. 73).

Biéler stayed in Venice for several weeks in 1929 and 1930, capturing scenes of the city in a series of gouaches (cat. 108, 109).

In the Valais he used the same technique in opposition to the unbridled large-scale destruction of historic buildings going on there. A typical example is *Maison peinte à Botire* (The Painted House) (cat. 111). In the spring and summer of 1931 he produced a large number of works in this vein (cat. 112). They were intended for a planned book, which, however, did not eventuate.

The landscapes Biéler painted of the Lavaux district at the time show a moderate impressionism in which shapes and forms tend to dissolve and masses in the same color tone merge with one another (cat. 106) while his Valisian landscapes of the 1940s (cat. 119, 120, 123) are influenced by postimpressionism.

Overview

The tour through the exhibition ends in the hall with an overview of Biéler's diverse oeuvre, as a 1911 self-portrait in this space reveals (cat. 69). To conclude we again show how skillfully Biéler oscillated between the urban modern world and the timeless existence of a rural community. A disdainful dandy (cat. 10) is the counterpart to a contented farmer (cat. 65), a lady in a flower garden (cat. 78) to a farmer's wife in a clearing in the woods (cat. 64). Ornamental portraits and a large-format group portrait invite the beholder to enter through a door decoration produced by Biéler himself and again view the artist's key symbolist artworks. At the same time, an amazing monumental decorative frieze (cat. 74) has room here to fascinate visitors who enter the space, only to be surprised again by the radiance of a stained glass window he designed in a style strongly reminiscent of Jugendstil (cat. 41)

Biography



- 1863** Ernest Biéler was born July 30 in Rolle. He spent his childhood in Lausanne
- 1880** Began to study art in Paris
- 1884** Discovered the Valais village of Savièse
- 1887** For the first time participated in the Salon with *Devant l'église de Saint-Germain à Savièse* (Before the church of Saint-Germain in Savièse) and *Portrait des demoiselles Yvonne et Noëlle Guiguer de Prangins*
- 1888** Illustrations for the *Edouard Guillaume Collection*
- 1892** Returned to Switzerland
- 1893** Ceiling painting for Victoria Hall in Geneva
- 1896** Rented a house in Savièse
- 1897** Returned to Paris
- 1899** *Les Feuilles mortes* (The Dead Leaves)
- 1900** *Les Sources* (The Spring)
Had a studio built in Savièse

Agenda

- 1903** Ceiling painting for the municipal theater in Bern
- 1905** Album of the vintage festival in Vevey
Stained glass window *Femmes valaisannes cueillant des fruits et des fleurs* (Women of Valais Picking Fruit and Flowers)
- 1906** Breakthrough of his graphic style
- 1909** Married Michelle Laronde (divorce 1921)
- 1911** *L'Eau mystérieuse* (Mysterious Water)
- 1914** Frescoes in the Telskapelle (Tells Chapel) in Lausanne
- 1917** Purchased a house in Montellier-sur-Rivaz
Returned to Switzerland for good
- 1927** Designed costumes, wagons, and decorations for the vintage festival in Vevey
- 1928** Married Madeleine de Cérenville
- 1932** Mosaic *La Paix* (Peace) on the west facade of the town hall in Le Locle
- 1934** Decoration of the interior of the church of Saint-Germain in Savièse
- 1948** Death of the artist

Öffentliche Führungen

Sonntag, 11h: 10. / 17. / 31. Juli, 28. August, 4. / 18. September, 2. / 16. Oktober, 13. November
Dienstag, 19h: 12. / 19. Juli, 2. / 16. August, 6. September, 25. Oktober

Öffentliche Führung mit Gebärdendolmetscher

Dienstag, 9. August, 19h
Ohne Anmeldung, Ausstellungseintritt

Visites commentées en français

Mardi, 19h30: 23 août, 20 septembre, 1^{er} novembre (19h)
Dimanche, 12h: 4 septembre

Literarische Führungen mit Michaela Wendt

Sonntag, 13h: 21. August, 4. / 18. September
Dienstag, 18h: 30. August, 18. Oktober, 1. November
Ohne Anmeldung, Ausstellungseintritt
+ CHF 5.-

Biéler und das Wallis: Trachten, Wein und Kunst

Sonntag, 4. September
- 10h30 Kinderworkshop
- 11h Öffentliche Führung in Deutsch
- 12h Visite commentée en français
- 13h Literarische Führung mit M. Wendt
- 14h + 15h Themenpräsentation: Trachten
- 14h30 + 15h30 Themenpräsentation: Fête des Vignerons

- 15h30 Bildbetrachtung zum Thema «Glaube und Brauchtum bei Biéler» (in Zusammenarbeit mit der evangelisch-reformierten, römisch-katholischen und christkatholischen Kirche Bern)
- 16h30 Besichtigung des Deckengemäldes von Biéler im Stadttheater Bern. Treffpunkt: Haupteingang Stadttheater Bern
- Walliser Spezialitäten im Café Kunstmuseum
Ohne Anmeldung, Ausstellungseintritt

Gesprächsrunde mit Gästen aus dem Wallis: «Mein Bild des Wallis»

Dienstag, 25. Oktober 2011
19h Öffentliche Führung
20h Gespräch mit Pascal Couchepin, André Marty (Moderation), Heinz Julen.
Ohne Anmeldung, Ausstellungseintritt

Léonard Gianadda raconte

Mardi, 1^{er} novembre 2011
19h Visite commentée (en français)
20h Léonard Gianadda raconte (en français). En collaboration avec l'Alliance Française de Berne

KATALOG / CATALOGUE

Ernest Biéler. Geträumte Wirklichkeit / *Réalité rêvée*

Hrsg. Kunstmuseum Bern / Matthias Frehner, Ethel Mathier und Fondation Pierre Gianadda. Mit Beiträgen von Matthias Frehner und Ethel Mathier. Ca. 270 Seiten. Deutsch / français. CHF 45.-

Exhibition

Duration	08.07. – 13.11.2011
Opening	Thursday, July 7, 2011, 18:30
Curator	Ethel Mathier
Entrance Fee	CHF 18.- / red. CHF 14.-
SBB RailAway-Offer	Benefit from 20% savings on train tickets, transfer and entrance fee. The RailAway-Offer is available at all train stations and at the Rail Service on 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19/min). More information: www.sbb.ch/ausstellungen
Opening hours	Mondays closed Tuesday, 10 a.m. – 9 p.m. Wednesday – Sunday 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.
Guided tours	T +41 31 328 09 11, F +41 31 328 09 10 vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

 **SBB CFF FFS**
RailAway Offer

IN COLLABORATION WITH:

Fondation Pierre Gianadda Martigny, where the exhibition is shown from 01.12.2011 to 26.02.2012.



FONDATION PIERRE GIANADDA
MARTIGNY (SUISSE)

SUPPORTED BY:




CREDIT SUISSE
Partner of the Kunstmuseum Bern

Kunstmuseum Bern
Hodlerstrasse 8 – 12, CH-3000 Bern 7
T +41 31 328 09 44, F +41 31 328 09 55
info@kunstmuseumbern.ch
www.kunstmuseumbern.ch