Golo Maurer

Carl Blechen's Italy: Beyond Quaint Clichés and Romantic Sunsets

Not every exceptional artist is recognized as such by the public during his lifetime. But in the case of Carl Blechen, this unjust state of affairs was particularly egregious. He was simply the right painter at the wrong time. Quite telling in this regard is an anecdote recounted by Gustav Nicolai in 1834 in the foreword to his highly polemical anti-Italy book "Italien wie es wirklich ist": "On the occasion of the most recent art exhibit in Berlin, the brilliant landscape painter Blechen presented vistas of Italy, painted in oil, to be judged by the public. The sky in these pictures is entirely the same as here with us; the soil and the foliage of trees have a brown tinge; a scorched, infertile land stretches out before the viewer [...]. As it happened, the public proved averse and the paintings were generally held to be poor. But having looked them over, a reputable artistic veteran who had spent a long time in Italy whispered in the ear of a friend: 'That's exactly what Italy looks like: It's accurate; you're just not allowed to say so!'" (Nicolai 1834, Part I, p. 8).

Lot 15

That describes the core of Blechen's difficulties where his reception is concerned: His pictures had little or nothing to do with the conventional expectations people had of Italy at that time, in terms of either subject matter, technique or representational style. The Italy he saw and painted was a different one. No blooming lemon trees or golden oranges, no zephyr breeze wafting through the sky – which was not even blue.

It is hard to say whether it was his rare, idiosyncratic, and so very independent genius that caused Blechen to perceive and paint this other Italy. For he was an exceptional talent, which becomes all the more evident considering the rather mediocre group of Italy painters of his era. It was a gift that put Blechen at the top of a small circle of peers who can be said to have included Rottmann, Fries, Fohr, and Reinhold, although he clearly outmatched them all. He was, in a sense, our very own Corot. Or would have been, begging pardon, had Corot not actually been the French Blechen!

But if the pictures of this ingenious German landscape painter were in many ways peculiar, or at least unusual, the same held true for his personality, career path, and experiences of Italy. Born in the city of Cottbus as the son of a tax officer, Blechen was expected to become, of all things, a bank clerk. Yet his talent for drawing, which was mainly self-taught, became so apparent that he broke off his training in banking and, upon the recommendation of none other than Karl Friedrich Schinkel, began working as a set design painter at Berlin's Königstädtisches Theater. This was not the most direct path to Italy, to be sure. Yet Italy was already present, before him and within him. Here is another anecdote, this time from Schinkel, his discoverer and mentor: "Yesterday the young Blechen was in my studio again, admiring a decoration that [...] depicted a Venetian patrician's house. Suddenly Blechen grabbed a brush, dipped it in my expensive sepia ink and declared, while reaching for a sheet of paper at his feet: 'I now see Venice in front of me. If only I, too, could be there once!' And he forthwith dashed out an image on the paper of the Canal Grande with the Church of Santa Maria della Salute, giving me the shivers as I watched him work: so accurately had he mastered a motif that he must have seen in his mind's eye as if in real life. For he could not have recalled this particular vantage point, which was so far from what is customary, from other pictures, given that no painter before him, as far as I know, had ever painted it." (Paul Ortwin Rave: Karl Blechen. Leben, Würdigung, Werk. Berlin 1940, p. 25). Whether the story was really true was for Schinkel alone to know. But when such legends swirl around an artist, is that not the surest harbinger of future greatness?

Be that as it may, Blechen did not paint any vistas of Venice, ever. He stopped there only very briefly on 14 November 1828, during a trip to Rome that also included stops in Ferrara, Bologna, and Florence. This single-minded fixation on the Eternal City may seem reminiscent to that of Goethe, but it probably had more to do with the tight schedule which the artist's limited budget dictated. Arriving in Rome in early December 1828, he was already back in Berlin by the end of November 1829 – hardly a travel program that permitted leisurely walks in the Boboli Gardens. While in Rome, Blechen did not spend much time socializing with the lackadaisical German artists who frequented the Café Greco and other convivial haunts not exactly conducive to work. Instead, he promptly set about making an independent study of the more curious motifs in his surroundings. Later that spring, he undertook an extended if somewhat harried trip to the south that would take him all the way to Capri and also, as we see in our painting, to Amalfi.

Carl Blechen. Mühlental bei Amalfi. Circa 1829. Oil/paper. Hamburger Kunsthalle

A narrow mill valley seems like a rather quirky subject to choose, especially outside of Amalfi, where glowing coastlines, glittering ocean waves, and brilliant crimson sunsets would have been the default motifs. Anyone who wanted to paint

gorges, watercourses, and cascades did so in Switzerland or in the Classical ambience of Tivoli and its Roman temples. The hills of Campania were a different matter, however: Here one found smokestack mills quite similar to the rolling mill at Neustadt-Eberwalde, another Blechen motif. For whatever reason, Blechen seems to have felt some sort of attraction to this particular shady and cool mill valley, a subject he returned to multiple times. He fashioned at least two oil sketches at this location, both of which he later turned into a painting: one currently located in Berlin (illustration on the right-hand side) and the one we are now offering. The sketch now kept in Hamburg (illustration on previous page) is a direct preliminary study for our painting, which the artist created after his return.

Carl Blechen. Erinnerung an Amalfi. 1835. Oil/paper.
Sold in 2018 at Grisebach for EUR 47,500

What we see in the work on offer astounds us at first: How different it is from what Richter, Fries or Schilbach had painted in this same region only a short time earlier! The mood is ambivalent, somewhere between magically enchanted and unfathomably menacing, rather like in those Grimms' fairytales that no one reads aloud to children anymore. An effect created through a delicate balance between showing and concealing, between searingly bright illumination and obscure, shadowy twilight. The viewer's imagination, eager to complete and even add to the picture, is immediately piqued, even though there is actually no sign of anything hidden, much less threatening. It is the sort of suspense only a few of the greatest film directors can create. The notion that a picture "speaks" to us is a hackneyed one, but in this case it really does apply. And we, being spoken to, are called upon to answer.

That we become so inexorably pulled into the scene also has to do with our vantage point as viewers. Deprived of an unobstructed perspective or overview of the valley, we remain stuck deep inside it, with only a small piece of open sky above us, unreachable, blocked by steep, darkly wooded mountain slopes whose spines threaten to swallow up the rays of noonday sun, probably sometime soon. For it is midday in this scene, an altogether unusual time for a painting. High Noon by the mountain stream, Pan's hour in a mill valley whose peaceful uncanniness is accentuated by its total emptiness – nobody in sight, not even a farm animal. But there is the mill building spanning the brook, shining out from the darkness, staking out its own, somewhat eerie presence as its hollow window recesses stare down onto the water. Is it a working mill? Or just an abandoned ruin? At any rate, no smoke is coming out of the smokestack – unlike in the very differently conceived Berlin version of the motif. What looks like greenish-brown vapor is actually vegetation darkly spilling down the shaded

Carl Blechen. Schlucht bei Amalfi. 1831. Oil/canvas. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin/Alte Nationalgalerie

slope in heavy cascades, only to rise again on the opposite side, frothed up into agitated vortexes by the sun's power. Straight through this drama flows the smoothly gurgling mountain stream, so tranquil by comparison. A lonely valley idyll somewhere between Virgil and Eichendorff.

So is this Italy? Of course, and how! It is that Italy where the narrow divide between civilization and nature is exceptionally clear-cut, high culture encountering the wilderness, in a manner wholly unique to that country, in our times just as it was in Blechen's day. The luminous masonry of the mill perched on its massive bridge arch could well pass for Roman; it certainly has something Classical about it, as Classical as the cragged primeval forest behind it is sublime like the ones described in the poems of Antiquity. Arcadian pastures are hemmed in by the woods of myth, which are massing against the open spaces like the shadows cast by the mountain ridges loom over the sunlit brookside. And for a brief suspended moment, peace holds sway over the sun-bathed steps and the warm stone wall, from whose crevices the stream's riparian herbage shoots forth. What an image!

Dr. Golo Maurer directs the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome. He earned his doctorate with a dissertation on how German artists and travelers experienced and imagined the landscape of Italy during the 18th and 19th centuries. He has published authoritative writings on German landscape painting in Italy, on the architecture of the Italian Renaissance, and on art historiography.

15 Carl Blechen

Cottbus 1798 – 1840 Berlin

"Mühlental von Amalfi". Circa 1830
Oil on canvas. Relined. 74.5 × 99 cm (29 ⅜ × 39 in.). On the stretcher a label with black round stamp: Bundespräsidialamt Bundeseigentum. Catalogue raisonné: Rave 1122. [3027] Framed.

Provenance
Isaac (known as Jacques) Heymann Goldschmidt, Berlin (at the latest 1906–1911) / Eugen Carl and Arthur Jacques Goldschmidt, Berlin (1911–1938, by descent, then to Edgar Jacques Moor, the nephew of the above-mentioned, by descent) / German Reich (1942–1944, through confiscation) / Sonderauftrag Linz (1944–1945, acquired at auction house Hans W. Lange, Berlin / unknown (1945–1946, theft from the „Führerbau", Munich) / Amerikanische Militärregierung, Central Collecting Point, Munich (1946–1949) / Ministerpräsident Bavaria, Munich (1949–1952) / Federal Republic Germany (1952–2024, as loan in the Stiftung Fürst-Pückler-Museum Park and Schloss Branitz, 2024 restituted to the heirs of Edgar Jacques Moor) / Private Collection, USA

EUR 100,000–150,000
USD 110,000–165,000

Exhibition
Ausstellung deutscher Kunst aus der Zeit von 1775–1875 [Deutsche Jahrhundertausstellung]. Berlin, Königliche Nationalgalerie, 1906. vol. 1: Auswahl der hervorragendsten Bilder, p. 125, ill. 105; vol. 2: Katalog der Gemälde, p. 28, no. 96; [Handkatalog:] Gemälde und Skulpturen, 2nd edition, p. 59, no. 96

Literature and illustration
G(uido) J(oseph) Kern: Karl Blechen. Sein Leben und seine Werke. Berlin 1911, p. 172 („Mühle im Tal von Amalfi") / Gemälde deutscher Meister des XIX. und XX. Jahrhunderts: Sammlung Oskar Skaller, Berlin, Nachlaß Rudolf Philipp Goldschmidt und anderer Privatbesitz. Berlin, Paul Cassirer, and Hugo Helbing, Munich, 13.12.1927, cat. no. 42, ill. pl. XVIII / B [sic]: Dezember-Auktion bei P. Cassirer. In: Der Cicerone. Halbmonatsschrift für die Interessen des Kunstforschers & Sammlers, no. 19, 1927, p. 746-747, here p. 747 / Anonymous: Kunstauktionen. Berlin. In: Kunstwanderer. Zeitschrift für alte und neue Kunst, für Kunstmarkt und Sammelwesen, 1./2.12.1927, p. 158–159, here p. 159 / Anonymous: Vorberichte. Berlin. In: Die Kunstauktion. Deutsches Nachrichtenblatt für das gesamte Kunstauktionswesen und Buchauktionswesen, vol. 1, issue 9, 11.12.1927, p. 1 / Exh. cat.: Carl Blechen. Mit Licht gezeichnet. Das Amalfi-Skizzenbuch aus der Kunstsammlung der Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie, and Rom, Casa di Goethe, p. 128 (not exhibited)

Our painting by Carl Blechen was owned by the Goldschmidts, a Jewish family from Berlin, since the early 20th century. The brothers Dr Arthur Jacques (1882–1938) and Dr Eugen Carl Goldschmidt (1878–1938) had inherited the work from their father Isaac (gen. Jacques) Heymann Goldschmidt (1842–1911) in 1911. Research by the Federal Art Administration revealed that Arthur had trained as a publisher and had a doctorate in philosophy. His brother Eugen Goldschmidt was a chemist and also had a doctorate in philosophy. Both were Jewish and were subjected to anti-Semitic persecution during the Nazi era. Shortly after the *Kristallnacht* pogroms, they decided to end their lives by their own hand. Their estate passed to their nephew Edgar Jacques Moor (1912–1994), who emigrated to South Africa that same year. In 1942, the assets Moor had left behind in Berlin – almost certainly including *Mühlental von Amalfi* – were confiscated by the Gestapo secret police. In 1944, the Berlin art dealer Hans W. Lange brokered the painting to the *Sonderauftrag Linz* organization tasked with securing artworks for the *"Führermuseum"* that Adolf Hitler was planning for his hometown of Linz. Following the end of World War II, the painting resurfaced in 1946 at the Central Collecting Point (CCP) set up in Munich by the US military government and eventually passed into the possession of the German Federal Government. More than eight decades after the painting was seized, the Federal Art Administration has now restituted *Mühlental von Amalfi* to the heirs.

The painting is free from restitution claims and will be offered with the explicit consent of the heirs of Edgar Jacques Moor.