

Author Finds an Artist Who Loves Luzern

By Arthur Meeker

LUZERN, Switzerland [Special]—This week, at last, I have met a man who feels as I do about Luzern—that it is the best possible place for creative work because it is, frankly, an artistic vacuum. There are, of course, two schools of thought about it. One holds that inspiration is only to be found in great world centers, where we are surrounded by many sided life and stimulated by constant human contacts. The other suggests that it is precisely these contacts we ought to avoid—that we become our best selves thru solitude and reflection, far from the distracting charms of intercourse with colleagues and rivals.

The man who agrees with me—almost the only one I know who does—is also interesting for another reason. He not only lives in Luzern because he likes to work here, but he was born in the city—a vital refutation of the stupid theory too often stated, that the Swiss appreciate art but cannot produce it. His name is Hans Erni, and he is one of the handful of modern painters still comparatively young—he is now 42—whose reputation, well begun before the war, has grown steadily since then till it has reached international dimensions.

His pictures hang today in many big museums; his murals are to be found in public buildings from London to Milan; his fairly frequent one man shows have made him known all over the continent. Two years ago the sets and costumes he designed for the revival of Mozart's "Titus" were the admiration of Salzburg's festival, but it was only this summer, by chance, that I made his acquaintance and was able to tell him how much I liked them.

A morning call at his studio in the Hirschenplatz is an interesting experience. Now the Hirschenplatz is the heart of mediaeval Luzern, and the Dornacher Haus, where Erni lives, with its painted facade and gable figures, is one of the beautiful old Gothic buildings tourists come from miles to see and photograph. But once you enter the studio all is uncompromisingly modern. Plain white walls reflect the dancing morning light. The furniture is made of metal and severe; there is nothing that is not strictly functional.

The artist, whom we find engrossed in making selections for his first American one man show—which, incidentally, is to be held in Chicago—looks, as artists strangely often do, like one of his own pictures. Erni is partial to classical scenes and he himself has a classic head, with tight curls like a Roman emperor's, almond shaped eyes, and a straight, flat nose. Nobody would ever take him for a Swiss. It is also characteristic of him that none of his work appears to be inspired by Switzerland, thereby underscoring my thesis that he lives where he does to get away from it all and views life with his inner eye only.

He paints no landscapes of snowy Alps and sparkling waters, nor peasant scenes of facile quaintness. Erni's interests are wide enough; he is a student of classical literature, sociology, aeronautics, science in general. In fact, he comes close to measuring up to Leonardo da Vinci's ideal of the universal man. But when he draws or paints—except on occasions when he brings back a portfolio of sketches from a particular tour, such as his recent one to Africa—his imagination appears to be kindled by thoughts of Greece [or is it Crete?]. Gods and bulls and temples and men and women, seen as a modern would see them, and recorded with a sweeping, unswerving hand.

It is an art abstract in part yet wholly comprehensible. Even I, who have never been able to understand or sympathize with the modernists, and who am still unashamedly living in the 19th century when it comes to pictures,

can enjoy Hans Erni. That is, I think, because while he appeals to the eye with his superb draughtsmanship, he also persuades the mind to conceive something further, something that is implied on his canvases, even though not actually stated.

Erni's success stems perhaps from the very universality of his interests, the glinting variety of his keen mind. He refuses to be bound by the limitation of any one school. "Realism, surrealism, abstractionism—none of the three wholly answers the artist's problem," he says, "yet we experience all three, in one form or another, in everyday life. I have tried to combine these three approaches to the understanding of reality in my art."

Since meeting him—since learning that such a man lives and works in my city—I have felt less lonely in Luzern.