INTRODUCTION

THE SWISS INSTITUTE is proud to present the first American exhibition of the work of Albert Anker. For almost one hundred fifty years, the paintings of Albert Anker, in the eyes of the Swiss, have captured what they are all about. Starting in 1859, Anker's works were instantly popular, in Paris where he successfully participated at the *Salons*, and in Switzerland, where the country's political and economic elite to this day count among his most ardent collectors. Reproductions of Anker's works can be found throughout the country. The original paintings fetch top prizes at national auctions.

But Anker portrayed a Swiss lifestyle that never quite existed. Though working from live models—most often his two daughters—he posed them in scenes removed from, or at least atypical of, most peasants' brutal lives. His subjects are seen reading, knitting, combing their hair, always in a rural setting but distanced from the struggles of daily life. The peasants are portrayed as thoughtful, modest, diligent, deeply religious—all qualities the Swiss still value highly. Anker's Swiss, in fact, are so genteel and passive that they were of little use as national icons during the Second World War, and Ferdinand Hodler's stone-throwing heroes replaced them temporarily as favorite subjects.

Anker's work serves much the same function in Switzerland as does Norman Rockwell's in the United States. Anker's paintings yield insight into the Swiss national character—or what the Swiss would like it to be—in a way few studies could. His resistance to the new—to incorporating the technical and social changes made around him in the late 19th century—seem to be echoed in the current tendency in Switzerland to shy away from European integration. His juxtapositions of youths and old age are deliberately empty of the erotic suggestions of a Balthus and yet are highly topical to today's art world.

Education has long been a national obsession in Switzerland. The exhibition, under the guidance of curator Paul E. Müller, focuses on

Boy and Girl Playing the Mikado, 1885
Charcoal and black chalk on paper

this issue. I would like to express the Institute's appreciation to him and to the sponsors of the exhibition, Dr. Christoph Blocher, and Pro Helvetia, the Arts Council of Switzerland. Thanks also go to Gisela Kuoni who collected the photographs of Anker reproductions in private homes exhibited here.

—*Carin Kuoni*
DIRECTOR

"It shall always remain my ambition to become an industrious person rather than a famous artist."

—Albert Anker

EDUCATION AND MORAL TRAINING IN THE WORK OF ALBERT ANKER

ALBERT ANKER (1831-1910) continues to be the favorite artist of the Swiss. Countless reproductions of his work decorate Swiss homes, schools, and inns, and his genre paintings count among the country's national treasures. The peasant motif, made respectable by the French realist movement and embraced by Anker, became part of the Swiss national identity, and accounts at least in part for the extraordinary popularity of Anker's art. Though his works command prices equal to those of his compatriot Ferdinand Hodler, Hodler is much better-known to the American public. During his lifetime, however, Anker was not unknown in the United States. A number of his works were sold to American collectors at the time by established art dealers.

The son of a veterinarian, Albert Anker was born on April 1, 1831, in Ins, a farming village in the canton of Bern. Ins lies on the border between the German- and French-speaking parts of western Switzerland. Anker's art merges elements of both linguistic cultures: the French elegance of a cultivated *peinture* and the solid artistry provided by the German temperament. After pursuing theological studies in Bern and in Halle, Germany, Anker finally received permission from his father in 1854 to become a painter. Anker, the artist, remained concerned with theological issues. In Paris, he studied at the studio of his fellow countryman, Charles Gleyre, and at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Gleyre, a classicist influenced by Ingres, above all imparted to his student a self-confident drawing style. But unlike his colleagues in art, Renoir, Sisley, and Monet, all of whom also studied with Gleyre, Anker never became an impressionist. He did not favor bold experimentation, and during the entire course of his career he rarely deviated from his conservative, if extremely refined, painting style.

Anker numbers among the most notable genre painters of his time. Though his subject matter shares similarities with that of other artists—for example, Benjamin Vautier, a Swiss painter who attained fame in Dusseldorf—there are definite differences. Anker's scenes from the daily life of farmers have something timeless about them; the narrative moment is not placed in the foreground. His abundant motifs revolve around the human situation and extend beyond the strictly peasant theme *per se* to include sleeping, eating, working, entertainment, play, culture, and religion. This super-temporal, allegorical element may account for the fact that many of his multi-figured genre scenes appear strangely static.

Whereas his multi-figure compositions present typical scenes from the public life of country folk, such as *Die Gemeindeversammlung* [The Township Meeting], *Der Geltstag* [The Bankruptcy], *Die Armensuppe* [Soup for the Poor], *Die Ziviltrauung* [Civil Marriage Service], and *Die Länderkinder* [Country Children], Anker's paintings that depict one or two figures address the private sphere. Here, one often encounters children juxtaposed with grandparents. The trust between young and old derives from their shared attribute of being on either side of the *vita activa* of the middle generation. In two still lives titled *Junger Wein, Alter Wein* [Young Wine, Old Wine] Anker presents this theme allegorically: the aged, mature wine is obviously of better quality. His one-figure compositions show persons engrossed in reading or in housework. *Zeitung lesender Bauer* [Peasant Reading Newspaper], *Die Bibel lesende Grossmutter* [Grandmother Reading the Bible], *Der Dorfschneider* [The Village Tailor], *Der Gemeindeschreiber* [The Parish Clerk], *Kartoffelschälendes Mädchen* [Girl Peeling Potatoes], and *Strickendes Mädchen* [Girl Knitting] are all typical Anker themes. The artist portrays handiwork to be just as intellectually stimulating an activity as reading; the depicted atmosphere is evocative of a religious context. Depictions of hard, physical farm labor are not to be found in Anker's work. Anker's many paintings of children and old men and women fall between genre and portrait painting: The figures represented are simultaneously types and individuals. Anker stated he attempted to portray the individuality of his subjects: "From the beginning, I have stressed the psychological aspect to the best of my abilities. It always seems to me that a picture lacking this aspect has been robbed of its light."

Young Woman Peeling Potatoes, n.d.
Watercolor on paper

Anker's earthenware creations are scarcely known in his own country. Commissioned by the Parisian firm of T. Deck, the artist hand-painted over five hundred wall slabs and decorative plates. The overwhelming majority of these pieces—a result of the taste of the French public at that time—depicted historical and Biblical personages; only a few of the faience works share themes with Anker's paintings.

A great number of Anker's works revolve around the themes of education and training. In the aftermath of the stormy political, economic, and social upheavals of the late nineteenth century, the Swiss saw the necessity of educational reform. A member of his village's school commission, Anker was greatly interested in educational matters. He vehemently supported the *Volksschule*—comprising the elementary school and its upper division—and teacher training. The fact that the artist painted many of his pictures from a child's point of view is evidence of his sympathetic attempt to approach the child's reality.

Anker was also committed to the theories of compatriots Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1854), and Jeremias Gotthelf (1707-1854). He shared the conviction that social milieu played a decisive role in character development with the Bernese author Gotthelf (whose novella, *Leiden und Freuden eines Schulmeisters* [Sorrows and Joys of a Schoolmaster], Anker illustrated). Like Pestalozzi, an educator to whom he dedicated a painting, Anker believed that education was not merely the mechanical imprint of knowledge, but rather an unfolding of the child's intellectual aptitude. In Anker's group portraits with educational themes, such as *Dorfschule im Schwarzwald* [Village School in the Black Forest], *Dorfschule von 1848* [Village School, 1848], *Schulspaziergang* [School Excursion], *Strickschule* [Knitting School], and *Kleinkinderschule auf der Krichenfeldbrücke* [Nursery School on the Krichenfeld Bridge], the teacher is never portrayed as a punitive, harsh authoritarian, but instead as a benevolent role model, always standing by helpfully. The artist's pedagogical inclinations are even more apparent in his paintings depicting two figures: Often the subjects are an elderly person and a child or two siblings facing one another, the young child learning through careful observation and imitation. Through his paintings of children at play, Anker intended to classify play as an educationally worthwhile activity. In the works' closely framed spaces, the artist formally evokes an atmosphere of trust, one in harmony with everyday life.

Albert Anker's world conveys certain clichés about Switzerland. The current exhibition suggests that the rural genre in Anker reaches beyond a nationalistic concept and simply provides the foil for the wider theme of education as a universal good.

—*Paul E. Müller*
GUEST CURATOR

Girl Reading with Child Sleeping on Her Lap, n.d.
Sketch for a plate. Ink, watercolor, and pencil on paper