

Lumina coelestia

Franz Bucher's Colourful Heavens

Classical art theory knows of two myths concerning the origins of painting: the tale of Narcissus who discovered his own reflection in the water, and the story of the shepherd who drew the outline of his shadow in the earth with his crook. If Nordic countries had been the birthplace of Classical art theory rather than Greece or Italy, then perhaps other myths might have given rise to the origins of painting, possibly inspired by experiences with colourful skies. How differently would art have developed on the basis of such experiences. Instead of the flag of mimesis (mirror-like copying and detailed drawing) having been flown over the centuries, painting based on colourful sky-patterns would have been related to abstraction much earlier.

Franz Bucher's paintings of colourful skies have, on the one hand, been inspired, by experiences with the midnight sun north of the polar circle, and on the other, by the experiences with the northern lights, which he had the opportunity to observe on two journeys. Even though the pictures may appear to be abstractions, Bucher, as always, starts from natural phenomena which captivate him, which amaze him, and for whose expression he then seeks an artistic language. The flaming lights that appear by chance in the night skies of the northern polar regions, or respectively, the colourful firmament with its reflection on the surface of the sea as perceived above all at twilight, are the primary subject matter of his pictures. These are metaphorically charged according to the interpretation the painter chooses.

If we try to describe such pictures, we quickly fall into a metaphorical way of speaking. We tend to talk about lights in the dark, about light signals in the sky, about celestial alphabets, about the glowing heavens, about the pull upwards, and the like. These metaphors are echoed in the titles given to some of his own pictures by the painter himself: "Open Beginning-Open End", "Endless-Unendless", "Reflections", "Field of Energy", "Whitsun", all titles which stand next to those of a more descriptive kind such as "Midnight Sun", "Northern Lights", "Light in the North" and "Horizon".

There are many reasons for such metaphorical readings. One is the motif itself of the northern lights whose creation is the subject of so many speculations and myths. A further reason is the fascination emanating from the polar light apparitions, as well as from the colourful skies of twilight - whereby the fascination is certainly not only connected to the strong hues of the skies, but essentially to the fact that the light source which begets such colouring cannot itself be seen.

The fortuitous traces of the northern lights and the multi-coloured skies of dawn or sunset have something mysterious about them, especially since the source of light remains hidden. Light and colour indicate a hereafter, something which is outside of being seen.

Bucher's skylscapes release a feeling of mystery, of enigma, of weirdness even. Are they prophetic pronouncements that appear up there in the sky, or are they luminous signs to be read as doomsday writing on the wall? According to our mood or frame of mind, we tend to interpret the colours of such skies as the all-consuming fire of the Apocalypse or as the power-giving energy of Pentecost. The heavens transmit an image of a hereafter, a notion of a space different to

the one in which we move. We are inclined to imagine a reflection of that heavenly light which we are not yet allowed to see here on earth.

In his book *On Light in Painting*, Wolfgang Schöne laments that what he calls the “sacred refulgence” has got lost in modern art. It is a phenomenon which he associates with the loss of God’s image in the modern trend. By “sacred refulgence” he means a light that can be traced to a source which is neither natural nor artificial, but rather stemming from divine genesis. It is true that we no longer find the gold ground of medieval painting present in modern art, but must we really take that to mean that the notion of God has irrevocably faded away?

When Caspar David Friedrich was commissioned for an altar painting around the year 1800, he chose to paint a wooded hilltop on which he placed a crucifix with a sun sinking behind the knoll, its rays colouring the heavens red. This painting was heavily criticized, whereby the art critic Basilius von Ramdohr principally censured the absence of a Biblical motif. The artist retorted that for him the invisible sun in the picture was an image of the eternal life-giving Father. He defined the landscape as a religious picture, a view of the Divine, in as far as the painting took God’s creation as its subject.

Franz Bucher does a similar thing when he gives the title “Whitsun” to a certain number of his northern lights paintings. The flaming appearance of the polar lights awakens in him associations with the events of Pentecost. They cause him to recall that experience with divine energy which is the source of the Whitsun narrative. In this sense, his depictions of the lights in the heavens can be construed as being depictions of the Heavenly Light. *Lumina coelestia*.

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