



1 Arnold Böcklin, *The Isle of the Dead*, 1st version, oil on canvas, 111 x 155 cm, 1880, Kunstmuseum Basel



2 Arnold Böcklin, *The Isle of the Dead*, 3rd version, oil on wood, 80 x 150 cm, 1883, Nationalgalerie Berlin

Stefan Banz

Arnold Böcklin: The Isle of the Dead

In 1880, at the age of fifty-two (the same age as myself as I write this article), Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) painted the first version of his most famous painting *The Isle of the Dead* (Fig. 1), of which four further versions were executed in the following six years. Four of these have survived to the present day. The fourth picture painted on copper in 1884 was lost in Berlin during the Second World War.

The remarkable subject of this picture was probably prompted in spring 1880 by the commission from the young widow Marie Berna in Frankfurt, the later Countess of Oriola, to paint a “picture for dreaming”.¹ This was precisely when Böcklin started to feel the first signs of age, with ailments coming to the fore that seriously impeded his painting and ultimately resulted in lasting depression.

In 1909, in their jointly published book *Neben meiner Kunst. Flugstudien, Briefe und Persönliches von und über Arnold Böcklin*, Carlo Böcklin (1870–1934), the artist’s son, and Ferdinand Runkel wrote: “In the summer of 1880, the master’s painful afflictions precipitated a serious nervous depression. His lack of interest in working had been joined by fatigue and such a deep melancholy that those around him were seriously concerned about him. All manner of means were vainly sought to alleviate his bodily torments. (...) His heart and nerves had been adversely affected by an ample dose of salicylic acid that had become necessary. (...) As the last resort, his worried spouse hit upon the idea of a change of air, and Böcklin, who had always been a wanderer and derived his best artistic inspiration from the countryside, took up this idea with rapidly reviving spirits. In the company of (his pupil) Friedrich Albert Schmidt, he travelled to Ischia, the delightful island off the coast of Naples, in July and sought the assuagement of his pains under the gleaming sun of the most beautiful summer sky and in the blue waves of the gulf. However, he was still with little hope on his departure, a downtrodden victim of his sufferings, and his final gloomy words to his wife were: “You will see me again in Florence either healthy or not at all.” (...) Böcklin’s depressive mood at the time (was) so strong that, in his endless hours of agony, he seems often to have toyed with and considered the idea of taking his own life. The pain alone would not have disheartened this powerful man, but the rheumatic inflammation of his joints had also stricken his right shoulder, and, with his creative hand, with whose dexterity a new world had been created, Böcklin was only able to guide the brush in great pain and with great effort.”²

During the days spent in Ischia, Böcklin himself penned several letters to his wife. At first despondent, his mood brightened increasingly and, finally, on 7 August, he writes: “*Things are getting better every day, I still feel a little pain when the sirocco blows, but only very little, so I now believe that I will truly be completely cured if I do not overexert myself and continue the mineral baths ... I’m taking long walks on the island, and the wine this year is very good ...*”³

Before landing on Ischia, Böcklin visited Richard Wagner on Posillipo, a ridge of hills on the outskirts of Naples.⁴ The painter visited the composer out of courtesy, because Wagner’s wife Cosima had written to him earlier, ask-

ing him to design the set for the master's latest opera in Bayreuth. Carlo Böcklin and Ferdinand Runkel write that a musical entertainment took place that evening at Wagner's house: "Rubinstein, Wagner's enthusiastic Paladin, played from the *Twilight of the Gods*, and Böcklin saw the composer of the musical drama suddenly vanish behind a curtain of gold brocade. He was not yet aware of Wagner's insistence of only listening to his own music in the dark in order to judge it. From time to time however, the master hurried out from behind the curtain to whisper Rubinstein instructions (...) before vanishing again – a peculiar spectacle – behind the gold brocade. Meanwhile, the music continued peacefully and tempestuously." After the performance, Wagner said to Böcklin: "You don't know much about music, do you?" And the painter replied: 'Hopefully more than you do about painting.' Böcklin was angered because, among other things, Wagner had demanded that for the set he paint plants on mountain peaks where, at such altitude, they would never be accustomed to grow."⁵

Böcklin then travelled in Schmidt's company on to Ischia for his intensive bathing cure. His pains relented in a short while and "his mood, his lust for work and his desire for company and a cool evening drink returned undiminished."⁶ On one occasion, Anton Dorn, Director of Naples' Zoological Station, proposed taking him on an extended sea trip. When we consider such famous paintings as the *Villa on the Seashore* and *Ruin by the Sea*, this trip must have made a lasting impression on him. Schmidt later claimed that he had "learned at first hand from Böcklin that, in the July days of 1880, the view of Ischia's fortress with its stone casemates had inspired the conception of the *Isle of the Dead*." In its monumentality, the composition as a whole has something Wagnerian about it, and the cypresses reaching up from the rocks high into the sky recall the composer's wish to have plants on rocky summits in the set planned for his new opera.

In his 1920 essay "Die neu erworbenen Gemälde Arnold Böcklins" for the Annual Report of Kunstmuseum Basel, Alfred Schmidt for his part mentions a letter to Marie Berna of 29 June 1880, in which Böcklin writes: "*The picture Die Gräberinsel (The Isle of Tombs) was dispatched to you last Wednesday. You will be able to dream yourself into the realm of the Shades until you believe you feel the soft, warm breeze that wrinkles the sea. Until you will shy from breaking the solemn silence with a spoken word.*"⁸

This letter confirms not only the Countess' commission for him to paint "a picture for dreaming", but also the fact that Böcklin had chosen the subject of *The Isle of the Dead* and applied it to the canvas before his trip to Ischia. In other words, the trip to Ischia possibly was not the inspiration for this unusual subject, but, conversely, the latter seems to have inspired the journey to convalesce on the island. Perhaps he had heard from his Italian wife Angela Pascucci or someone belonging to his circle of friends that his picture showed similarities to the fortress on Ischia or that there were medicinal baths there that might help him gain relief from his rheumatism. Moreover, Böcklin called the picture commissioned by Mrs Berna *The Isle of Tombs*. The title *The Isle of the Dead* was only awarded later by the Berlin art dealer Fritz Gurlitt who sold Böcklin's third version (Fig. 2) – the one that belonged to Adolf Hitler from 1939 and today hangs in the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin.⁹

So the "picture for dreaming" was an "isle of tombs". In the first version, the painter shows the rocky island with its column-like cypresses as a nocturnal scene in which the tomb architecture hewn in the rock is illuminated by the moon and glows in the dark. The scene reminds us of a horror film. There is a ghostly hush, with not a breath of wind. The cypresses stand tall and motionless against the night sky while the sea pauses and celebrates the proverbial lull before the storm. Before the island, we see a solitary rowing boat with a long-haired, slightly built ferryman seen from behind. He is ferrying a mysterious passenger wrapped in white robe who has his back both to him and to the viewer; in front of the passenger lies a coffin with a white sheet draped over it. With the help of a ferryman, the veiled personification of death thus seems to be about to bring a new corpse to the "island for dreaming". We, the viewers, regard ourselves as being aboard a ship some way behind them, travelling in the same direction. In this depiction, Böcklin expresses in imitable fashion the irresolvable paradox of impermanence and eternity. The monumentality of this haven of death is contrasted with the fleeting nature of life: the eternal keeping of a lifetime that has come to an end.

If we now look a little more closely, we will discover that the effeminate ferryman (another paradox) is not rowing the boat to the "isle of the dead" at all. He is sitting, holding the oars above the water as if about to row away from the island. So is the bright, veiled figure illuminated by the moon – contrary to our expectations – in fact bringing a corpse from the realm of darkness back into the world of the living in order to awaken him from the dead? Is this pure, god-like figure not Death at all but in fact Life? Is it God resurrecting the Saviour from the Beyond, just like the medicinal baths on Ischia relieved Böcklin of his unbearable rheumatic pains and restored his ability to paint?

There is no clear answer to this question. The ambiguity of the ferryman's direction of travel made precisely this first version of the *Isle of the Dead* so challenging and unique. Because in all other four versions, the ferryman *stands* in the boat and transports Death and the corpse to the "isle of tombs" with powerful and unambiguous movements. Mysterious indecisiveness has yielded to unmistakable gesture. Böcklin underlines this additionally by having the mysterious night give way to dawn in the second version and finally to the light of day in the third painting (Fig. 2). At the same time, the unusually tall landscape format of the first picture yields in the later versions to the classical broad canvas.



There is also a second important detail that underlines the ambiguity of this depiction. In contrast to the other versions, the first picture is devoid of a man-made entrance gate. In its place it shows sombre cypresses. And what lights up brightly to the right of them and immediately recalls a built stone wall could just as well be water flowing smoothly over a ledge.¹⁰ It is entirely up to us viewers to interpret it as part of Death's gate or, alternatively, as a powerful, life-imparting and curative waterfall.

In Böcklin's home town of Basel there is a saying: *Verzell du daas em Fäärimaal!* – Tell that to the ferryman! This a joking, ironic and also scornfully deprecatory way of saying that one does not believe a word of what someone has said.

In this picture, caution is definitely advised in the face of the seemingly obvious, because even a funeral (or the work of the grave-digger) is ultimately a symbol of life. Life does not exist without death, and life is not perceptible as such without death.

Notes

¹ Franz Zelger, *Arnold Böcklin: Die Toteninsel, Selbstheroisierung und Abgesang der abendländischen Kultur*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1991, p. 8.

² Ferdinand Runkel and Carlo Böcklin (ed.), *Neben meiner Kunst. Flugstudien, Briefe und Persönliches von und über Arnold Böcklin*, VITA, Deutsches Verlagshaus Berlin-Ch., 1909, p. 43.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 226–227.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁸ http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Toteninsel (26 February 2014) and Rolf Andree, *Arnold Böcklin. Die Gemälde*, Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag, Basel, and Prestel Verlag, Munich, 1977, p. 418. H.A. Schmid's quoted essay "Die neu erworbenen Gemälde Arnold Böcklins" appeared in the Annual Report of the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel, 1920, pp. 23–33.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ I travelled personally to Basel on 1.3.2014 to view the painting again and investigate this matter at close hand.

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