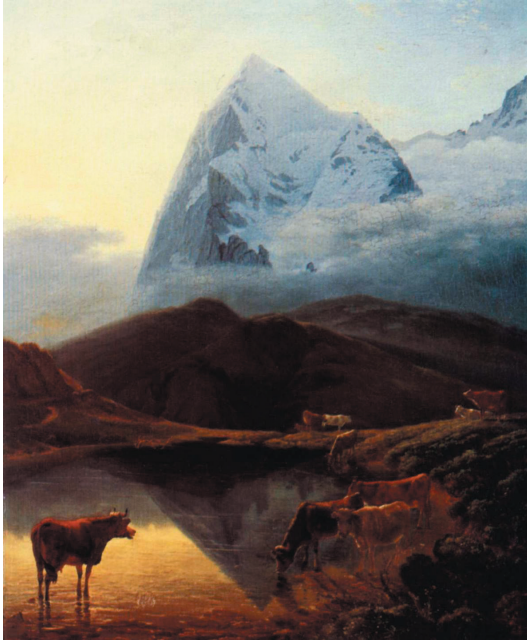

DONALD M ORR
Picturing the Eiger



'The Eiger from Wengeralp' by Maximilien de Meuron.

Numerous artists over the years have attempted to affect the ideal mountain picture and in the 19th century many came under Ruskin's influence on art through *Modern Painters* and other works, which could be both formative and at the same time contradictory. Ruskin determined to experience the Alps at close quarters but his ascent of the Buett with the guide Couttet in 1844 was his first and last climb. The mental rigour and physical exertion necessary to gain that understanding eluded him. For Ruskin that renewal of self which was 'the goal of all their striving'¹ was not to be realised.

An early exhibition of mountain paintings was organised in London by D W Freshfield in 1894 when he was president of the Alpine Club, consisting of works by historical and contemporary artists, those who sought out dramatic mountain landscapes and those who also climbed them. In his

1. R Hubank, *Evening Light*, The Ernest Press, 2009, p250.

preface to the exhibition catalogue Freshfield stated 'the beauty of the Alps exists; poets have found it and painters will.' What was hoped for was a new enthusiasm for the Alps as a source of true and adequate feelings as opposed to 'rather foggy impressions'. A closer interaction between painters and their subject matter was called for. While the exhibition was a success Freshfield continued writing about 'the lack of beauty and interest of most of the paintings which were devoted year after year to the Alps and other ranges.'² Some of Freshfield's writing in his descriptions of mountain areas could easily rank among the finest in travel literature; his *The Exploration of the Caucasus* has been described as having 'a quality that would bring tears to the eyes of even the most blasé bibliophile.'³ Yet he avoided trying to express his love of mountains or any aspect of mountain philosophy in prose. Only in some of his poetry did he approach the notion of a region of greater truth, of a sense joy and fulfilment in the mountains – 'to dwell in the elemental spaces, remote from Heaven and Hell.'⁴

By 1955 Winthrop Young was claiming that mountaineering literature 'had been inhibited by the repressive conventionalism of the nineteenth century'⁵ but was also still advocating that 'an artist of mountains will devote his whole skill to painting them as they are.'⁶ From someone who was highly literate this seems rather vague advice, especially given how innovative he was in climbing and organisational terms. If visual accuracy is being demanded, under what weather conditions or what atmospheric circumstances should it be delivered? These things vary daily, let alone through seasonal changes. As late as 1974, Merrick was still advocating that the 'art of portraying mountain peaks in a realistic and accurate manner'⁷ was what was needed. For him 'only a few truly great artists have painted immortal mountain paintings.'⁸ Yet he cites Turner as 'one of the few giants to turn his attention specifically to the Alpine landscape.'⁹ Turner certainly painted many Alpine scenes but it was the scale of the light effects and atmospheric that attracted him, allowing him to create impressionistic views. When one considers his depictions of Skye, particularly 'Loch Coruisk'¹⁰, we are beyond any impression and really are in the region of expressionism. That much desired realism seems to come in many guises.

What were artists to seek? 'A mystical light thrown over the universe?' '[A]n insight into the unknown?'¹¹ Freshfield wanted a more experiential foundation for mountain paintings but not all mountaineers wanted to lose themselves 'in the vast emptiness where there is nothing but sun, silence

2. C Engel, *They Came to the Hills*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1952, p162.

3. T Anderson, *Bread and Ashes: A Walk through the Mountains of Georgia*, Vintage, London, 2004, p227.

4. D Freshfield, 'The Song of the Himalayan Fairies'.

5. G Young, 'Courage, and Mountain Writing', *The Mountain World*, M Barnes (ed), Allen & Unwin, London, 1955, p11.

6. *Ibid*, p17.

7. H Merrick, *Companion to the Alps*, Batsford, London, 1974, p70.

8. *Ibid*, p76.

9. *Ibid*, p71.

10. J Turner, 'Loch Coruisk', watercolour on paper, 8.9cm x 14.3cm, 1831, Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh.

11. C Engel, p63.

and solitude.’¹² The question as to what painters should paint is as wide and varied as trying to define what climbers should climb. A love of science or of nature, a sense of adventure or danger, ambition or escapism, or a quest for a vague mysticism have all been recruited as reasons for the development of mountaineering. For artists, the motives included a ‘new’ scene, an arresting panorama, technical difficulty in creating a three-dimensional illusion of complex topography and, for the most part, selling the production on completion. Scenes could be enhanced, valleys steepened, waterfalls heightened, rocky peaks augmented simply because the mountain was a model for a painting, an artwork, not a photographic representation. It may well have been that direct image, that unadorned depiction that Freshfield desired, but that was more for photographers. That isn’t the way artists work and not what art is about.

Artists who climbed, who regularly visited mountain areas, travelled through them and experienced the weather conditions and physical effort required to ascend them were not common. More were content to work from the valley, to find a viewpoint and depict distant peaks. The four European artists selected here all committed themselves to mountain areas recording the landscape that fascinated them and, by that, revealing it to many who would never enter those regions at all. They come from different eras and schools of thought, their styles vary, but their subject is the same: the Eiger.

Maximilien de Meuron (1785-1868)

Born into an aristocratic family in Switzerland, his art lessons began in Neuchâtel with Matthieu Ricco but he later studied with the Giradet brothers who were noted for their etchings and engravings. Directed towards a diplomatic career he studied law in Berlin but continued to learn about art and develop his own work while in Germany. Returning to Switzerland in 1803 he took a position in the foreign affairs ministry but resigned in 1808 to go to Paris and further his artistic interests. In 1809 he and Gabriel Lory visited Italy as part of their continuing education and by 1812 he was back in Switzerland attempting to organise a national museum of art for the country. He petitioned the government for a building, organised public opinion, and offered some of his own canvases to start the collection.

In 1818 and 1819 he worked in the Bernese Oberland recording mountain landscapes which formed the basis of a major exhibition in 1822 in Paris. The success of this venture saw him elected to the grand council of the Canton of Neuchâtel the following year. By 1824 he was exhibiting at the Academy of Arts, Berlin where Friedrich Wilhelm III bought several of his works. This and the general appeal and quality of his work saw him made an honorary member of the academy in 1825 but he avoided the teaching commitment by declining the offer of a professorship. Throughout the latter half of the 1820s he organised several major art exhibitions, which greatly strengthened the standing of Swiss art.

12. *Ibid.*, p142.

In 1835 the painter Louis Léopold Robert committed suicide in front of his easel on the tenth anniversary of his brother's suicide, to whom he had been much attached. Meuron had been supporting Robert financially and encouraging him in his work, and was greatly upset by his death. He organised a retrospective exhibition of his friend's work the following year. Soon after this Meuron's son, also Maximilien, died unexpectedly and threw the artist into a depression whereby he stopped painting altogether. He did some sketching in 1842 on a trip to Italy but never again went back to the industry of his previous habits. The rest of his life was spent organising exhibitions and promoting local artists.

'The Eiger from Wengeralp'¹³ is a picture lying firmly within the German Romantic tradition. The few wandering cattle suggest that people rarely visit this area whose height and bleakness make it inhospitable. The colour in the lower half of the scene is a series of dark browns. Vegetation is sparse and it would imply that the only reason the cattle are there at all is to drink from the pool in the foreground; one can see little else to tempt them to this spot. The desolation is capped by the soaring verticality of the Eiger, creating a picture of two halves, which, while joined in the barrenness, are worlds apart. The horizontality of the lower portion is juxtaposed by the verticality of the upper. A hill-scape where occasionally there may be some green growth fronts a rock and icescape far removed from the world of men. This isolation is added to by a sea of mist rolling down from the south side of the mountain to circle around the north face, concealing the base and accentuating the difference between the two environments. The cattle in the foreground indicate that life is possible there but beyond that, on the mountain itself, nothing but rock, snow and ice prevail. While the summit of the Eiger was first attained in August 1858, Meuron's depiction is remote and isolated: an object of contemplation not a mountain to set foot on.

Alexandre Calame (1810-64)

Born in Vevey, Switzerland into an artistic family, Calame's father was a stone carver but he experienced a difficult childhood, including the loss of the family fortune. This ended his formal education and he worked in a bank from the age of 15. It was in his spare time that he continued drawing and painting mainly small, local landscapes. In 1829 he gained a patron who made it possible for him to study under François Diday whereby, after a short time, he determined to dedicate himself to art. By 1835 he was exhibiting his Alpine scenes in Paris and Berlin. In 1842 he went to Paris to show his mountain paintings including scenes of Mont Blanc, the Jungfrau, the Brienzensee and Mont Cervin. Partly on the strength of this he started teaching in Geneva and in 1844 visited Italy bringing back many studies that broadened his appeal with the public. Yet the Alps remained his speciality. Printmaking and lithography of his sketches allowed a greater awareness of his work and his 18 studies of Lauterbrunnen and Meiringen and 24 sheets of Alpine passes

13. M de Meuron, 'The Eiger from Wengeralp', oil on canvas, 51cm x 40.5cm, Institution Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Neuchâtel.



'The Grand Eiger' by Alexandre Calame.

made him famous all over Europe. Writing a century later Arnold Lunn cited him, along with Lory and Linck, as a superior mountain painter.¹⁴

'The Grand Eiger'¹⁵ is a fine example of the German tradition of Romantic painting and it too is based on the view from Wengeralp at the top of the Kleine Scheidegg pass. Calame knew of Meuron's painting, but his 1884 interpretation varies greatly from the one painted 65 years previously. The foreground rocks are an invention and in the mid distance the pool that Meuron also utilised. Perched on the foreground rocks is a bearded vulture, a lammergeier found in Alpine regions, intimating this is the abode of such creatures but also perhaps offering a warning to be wary in this environment. The darkness of these immediate rocks, the vulture scanning below, and the light across the chasm all contribute to this warning. Beyond rises an ethereal vision of the Eiger. Calame still accurately relays the soaring verticality of the mountain balanced at half height in his composition with the horizontally based foreground. The doubled perpendicularity fashioned by the foreground cliffs creates a sense of remoteness, of isolation whereby the sunlit sublimity of the mountain is ever out of reach: a sight to be seen, contemplated, even venerated, but at a distance.

14. A Lunn, *A Century of Mountaineering*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1957, p65.

15. A Calame, 'The Grand Eiger', oil on canvas, 106.2cm x 139.9cm, Kunstmuseum, Bern, 1884.



'View of the Eiger and the Mönch from the Wengeralp' by August Leu.

August Wilhelm Leu (1818-97)

August Wilhelm Leu was born in Münster in 1818 and trained under Johann Wilhelm Schirner, a landscape painter of the Düsseldorf School. Leu travelled to Norway in 1843 and again in 1847. The resulting paintings established him firmly in the Romantic tradition and effectively made his reputation. His mountain scenes of Norway and the Alps, usually produced on a large format, were firm favourites with the public and allowed him to travel regularly to the Alps. Strengthening his appeal, he moved to Brussels for a time before moving back to Düsseldorf. His fame broadened and he received acclaim at the Paris Exposition of 1855. This renown continued and in 1882 he moved to Berlin to become a professor of art and a member of the academy where he received several gold medals over the years. His prominence in mountain landscape painting saw him elected to the Vienna, Amsterdam, and Brussels academies where, at the latter, he was awarded the Belgian Order of Leopold, an honorary order of knighthood. He continued to paint Alpine pictures, dying in Seelisburg, Switzerland in 1897.

'View of the Eiger and the Mönch from the Wengeralp'¹⁶ contains a small classic of human interest in the two young women collecting water in the

16. A Leu, 'View of the Eiger and the Mönch from the Wengeralp', oil on canvas, 81cm x 100cm, Gallerie Koller, Zurich, 1865.

left foreground but the scale of the figures and the state of the chalet easily avoid accusations of sentimentality. The mountain massif is the subject of the canvas. High summer in the Alps and bright sunshine reveals the peaks with a slight haze over them and cloud building over the north face of the Eiger. First climbed in August 1858, a year after the first ascent of the Mönch, this canvas would have attracted considerable interest in 1865 when it was painted where the balance between quiet agricultural activity and the looming verticality of the north face would not be lost to alpinists.

Henry Wood (1869-1944)

Best known as the founder of the Proms, which after his death became the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts, Sir Henry Wood was in his time a distinguished conductor and musician. His talent as a painter has almost been forgotten.

Winning prizes for music and art at school he entered the Royal Academy of Music at the age of 17, which was the start of his professional life. He claimed to have studied art at the Slade but he did attend painting classes at Heatherley Art School, one of the oldest independent art colleges in London, founded in 1845. While music was his profession, painting was his passion and wherever he went in the world his painting equipment went with him.

While Wood embraced the avant-garde in music furthering the work of Poulenc, Bartók and Stravinsky he did not aspire to nor reflect the concerns of the Impressionists or those of the Post-Impressionist Period. In 1911 at the Piccadilly Arcade Gallery, he organised a major exhibition of his paintings where the sale of some 50 oil studies raised a considerable sum for retired orchestral musicians. In an interview conducted by the *Guardian* in October 1938 he stated, 'Painting is my real love' and admitted 'but I have no talent whatever for portraiture.' He remained a life-long amateur artist concentrating on still life, domestic garden scenes, and landscapes from his travels.

'The Eiger, near Mürren'¹⁷ has inscribed on its reverse side 'The Eiger from my hotel in Mürren'. It was a painting he was especially delighted with. In a letter to his daughter Tania he stated, 'I cannot tell you the inner joy and satisfaction looking at the Eiger, for four or five mornings, gave me – it is a living and life-long experience.' For a talented amateur the capture of the intensity of the vertical north face is a triumph. Sharpness and perpendicularity dominate the image creating a feature as dwarfing as the Matterhorn. The juxtaposition of the lush green of the alp below the starkness of the north face, and the almost black-and-white treatment of the rock and icefields determine a powerful aspect where the soft blue of the sky strengthens the overall dominance of this feature in the landscape.

Recording the image of the Eiger continues. Graphic art utilises the north face in post cards and posters, contemporary artists still document aspects of the mountain, and photographs of the mountain and its railway proliferate

17. H Wood, 'The Eiger, near Mürren', oil on canvas, 60cm x 44.5cm, Royal Academy of Music, London, 1931.



'The Eiger, near Mürren' by Henry Wood.

in Swiss calendars. Film too has examined the mountain as a setting. Clint Eastwood's *Eiger Sanction* (1975) was based on Trevanian's 1972 novel; the death toll could be linked to the attempts on the north face throughout the 1930s. Directed by Louise Osmand *The Beckoning Silence* (2007), from Joe Simpson's book of the same name, shadowed the 1936 tragedy as a part documentary, part enactment of the events of that year. Similarly, the German *Nordwand* (2008) saw director Philipp Stölzl utilise the Kurz and Hinterstoisser struggle from a different angle. Factually based yet still examining the loss of life on the north face *The Alps: Climb of Your Life* (2007) directed by Stephen Judson was a commemoration of the attempt by John Harlin II on the *Eiger Direct* by his son 40 years after his father's death. The visual appeal of the Eiger and the challenge of its north face have not diminished.