

The Aargauer Kunsthaus

Aarau, Switzerland

Picture of the month

Portrait of Fraulein Staehelin, 1913

Otto Wyler



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Considering the broad range of subject matter Otto Wyler tackled during his lifetime, which he coupled to diverse painterly styles, the Aargauer Kunsthaus' choice of Mr. Wyler's *Portrait of Fraulein Staehelin* for its Picture of the Month is a particularly exceptional one for it indicates not only his painterly abilities but his early awareness of the European pantheon of artists. Painted in 1913, this composition, together with several others in Mr. Wyler's cabinet (*Woman Embroidering a Carpet*, *Betty Jaeger* (1912); *Woman in Kimono* (1912); *Girl in Aargauer Costume* (1913) amongst others), are, I suggest, the result of a strong influence by Art Nouveau, a partial response to the tail end of Japonism on Western European art and crafts.

Theoretically, it was possible that Mr. Wyler had access to canvases painted by others a number of years before; containing elements that fired his imagination and were viewed during his initial residence in Paris from 1905 to 1906. Most notably was the feasible linkage between Mr. Wyler's *Portrait of Fraulein Staehelin* and a single vertical panel from *Women in the Garden*, a four-part *Panneaux Décoratifs* by Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) currently in the collection of

the Zurich Kunsthaus, whose first version was created circa 1890 to 1891. Otto Wyler's rendition of Fraulein Staehelin, her unique pose with a drooping right hand and a determined three-quarter backward glance, decorative, off the shoulder décolleté dress, and floral background are near mirror images of Monsieur Bonnard's patterned female figure. Even his long eared dog; jumping playfully at his mistress's side corresponds to Mr. Wyler's canine image (also long eared) seated at Fraulein Staehelin's feet. The Frenchman's yapping dog is echoed by Mr. Wyler's insertion of a flowing yellow apron, draped from chin to toe. The flowing fabric can also be seen in a second Decorative Panel, that of a seated woman and cat.

The main disparities between the two pictures is Mr. Wyler's decision to pose Fraulein Staehelin indoors while, simultaneously, adjusting the fabric and cut on her dress to match the period style. Mr. Wyler has altered the background from an impressionist garden to an artificial garden (salon) by designing a Japanese screen as an interior background, ornately decorated in flattened, wild oriental floral patterns in a full palette, in contrast to Monsieur Bonnard's sharply cropped outdoor rendering of monochromatic trunk and scattered green leaves.

A second difference is the handling of the dress fabric; the Bonnard painted as a simple pattern of white dots on a burgundy field while Mr. Wyler has rendered a deep violet and mauve design of flowers and linear tendrils that resonate with the same density as the background screen.

Although documentation regarding this analogy is not available, one cannot dismiss entirely the similarities; undeniable parallels that amplify the assumptions and provide credibility to the fact that Pierre Bonnard supported Otto Wyler, in some small way, while planning his *Portrait of Fraulein Staehelin*.

Gil Goldfine

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* Otto Wyler *Portrait of Fraulein Staehelin*, 1913, Kunsthaus Aargauer

** Pierre Bonnard, *Women in the Garden*, ca. 1890, one of four decorative panels, 154x45 cm, charcoal, chalk, pencil and tempera on paper mounted on canvas. Kunsthaus Zurich