



THE ROBERT FAMILY OF ARTISTS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE

Heinrich Spinner (1985)

The Robert family, which in three generations produced six renowned artists, originated from the Neuchâtel Jura. Abram, father of the first generation of artists, had earned himself a fine reputation as a clock craftsman but was not an easy character. The centrepiece of the family was the mother, a woman of deep feeling, „d'une âme trop sensible“, as her son wrote. Her strength was rooted in her faith and in her love for her children.

That the clockmaking industry spread out from the Jura region, and flourished in the world, was due to virtues which also shaped the Roberts' art: diligence, conscientiousness, exactness even down to small details, and striving for perfection.

The first in the family to gain fame was **Léopold Robert** (1794-1835). He was born as, just across the boundary from his parental home, the town of La Chaux-de-Fonds lay in smoking ruins after a devastating fire.

That he later took as a portent of his dramatic life to come – a life that was to bring him the highest honours and a tragic end. As a pupil and friend of Jacques Louis David, the Parisian master-painter of the Napoleonic epoch, Léopold at first adopted his style with classical forms. Mainly in Rome, ultimately in Venice, he became a highly acclaimed and much sought after society painter and could hardly keep pace with commissions. He summoned to Rome his ten years younger brother, Aurèle, who, through working there as Léopold's assistant and right-hand man, himself became a painter. „The good Aurèle,“ wrote his eldest brother, „is the finest man I know.“ At the age of 41, and at the height of his achievements, Léopold committed suicide. „Sensitivity makes the artist – and kills him,“ runs an expression by Philippe Robert.

Aurèle Robert (1805 -1871) was held in high personal regard in artistic circles, but his modest, steady character – „calme et content“ as Léopold put it – was far removed from great artistic ambitions. As well as creating copies of his brother's compositions, Aurèle liked to paint small, homely pictures of church interiors. Aurèle had a decisive influence on the further destiny of the Robert family. A few years after Léopold's death, Aurèle returned to his home town of Biel, married a local lady and bought the old manor house of „Ried“ at the edge of the forest just beyond

Biel. Thus he was not only the founder of the Biel branch of the family, but also established, alongside pristine nature, a happy household whose inner values would guide the ensuing generations.

Aurèle's artist son was (Léo-) **Paul Robert** (1851-1923).

After being tutored by his father, he studied in Munich in the neoromantic tradition of Moritz von Schwind. This narrative art appealed strongly to the sensitive and imaginative young man. Hence he developed a dual approach: on the one hand, painting crowded allegorical scenes through to his huge murals; on the other hand painting in a realistic style (landscapes and naturalistic pictures).

Paul's boyhood drawing books are full of animals, some of which he watched on the manor farm at Ried. His talent is also revealed in humorous drawings from his school-days – drawings of animals active in human form. Perhaps his skill at depicting animals contributed to him accepting the Lausanne publisher Daniel Lebet's assignment to paint the plates of useful birds, to be issued as teaching aids in schools.

Clearly that was a completely new task — to create easily recognisable pictures of the various species as true to nature as possible. It was the start of the Roberts' significant combining of painting and natural history. Zealously, Paul Robert devoted himself to the study and exact observation of birds, already of interest to him since his childhood. And the resulting plates (1873 - 82) won great acclaim and extraordinary popularity at home and abroad. In Robert's pictures, and in the accompanying text by Eugène Rambert, you sense the late 19th century emergence of a new perception of nature – a new perception which joined together science and the joy of discovering and experiencing nature.

Previously, ornithological paintings and drawings were typically stiff, betraying all too obviously that their models had been stuffed, lifeless specimens. The birds looked as if they had been cut out and pasted on. Where they had been enlivened by the most influential bird artist Audubon, they quickly tended towards the theatrical. Paul Robert took another approach but was never satisfied. So, in the ensuing decades, he strove to get to know the birds more precisely and to paint them more true to nature. To begin, he painted over (more or less strongly) his old illustrations for a new book edition (1916) – and yet was still not satisfied and worked on. Thus his painted birds came to be livelier in how they looked and moved. This was at the time when photography was beginning to make possible another, new kind of approach to depicting the environment.

Paul Robert was an inspired and profusely productive painter. However, his life was plagued by exhaustion and scruples, which caused him to give up painting for three years and devote himself to evangelisation. With the help of friends, he was persuaded to resume his art, with the promise that in creating the great murals in the staircase of the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Neuchâtel, he could proclaim what was close to his heart. Here (1886-1894) and in the later murals at the original Federal Supreme Court in Lausanne (1898-1905), were his large-scale masterpieces. In the years that followed, despite his openness to other art and his rejection of polemics, he felt himself distanced from the new, stormy movements in art. More and more he withdrew. Then something significant happened. He was beguiled by the beauty of caterpillars, which he studied under the magnifying glass – he began to portray them so deftly that they seemed truly alive. Adding each caterpillar's food plant, he painted hundreds of watercolours with his mature and masterly skills producing richly

nuanced hues and endless variations of the same motif. At first he thought he should be ashamed that, “as an artist with the highest visions, he was painting such lowly creatures“. Then he realised that praising creation in its humblest forms was also a high mission for an artist. This inspired his incomparable collection of caterpillar paintings – a collection that has been rescued intact.

In his old age, as the town of Biel expanded ever nearer to Ried, Paul Robert built a new home out in the countryside at Jorat near Orvin in the Jura valley beyond Biel. Upon Paul’s death, that home was taken over by his youngest son, Paul-André.

Théophile Robert (1879-1954) was the first artist in the third generation. He earned a name for himself, especially in Paris, among the masters of the avant garde. Although nature plays a role in most of his paintings of nude models, landscapes and still life, he did not involve himself with flora and fauna as his father and brothers did. Naturalistic exactness and scientific study did not fit with his dedicated stylistic strivings which, for a while, were strongly influenced by cubism.

One could expect something similar to be true about **Philippe Robert** (1881-1923) who, as one of the few Swiss artists to be inspired by Art Nouveau, tried and achieved bold forms of composition. And yet, as a passionate botanist and flower-lover, he illustrated a book on flora and worked on one of his own. Philippe seemed predestined to be a successful artist. Early on, his talents were evident in watercolours of natural objects, especially of colourful autumn leaves. However, at age 17, he believed that his conscience was calling him to be a pastor. He completed theology studies and then, in Berlin, was impressed by ancient Egyptian and oriental art. This brought him to the conviction that there was a highest form of art which stemmed from firm faith, created clear forms that were not random, and possessed a religious content that aroused feelings of eternity. Was not this rather the way in which he should work to praise the Creator: as artist, should he not seek to celebrate Nature by abstract representation of it?

Soon he was given an important commission. The great botanist Henry Correvon believed he had found in *Paul* Robert the right illustrator for his book on the alpine flora. But Paul showed Correvon his son’s sketchbook and thus Philippe’s first flora came about (1908). Then in 1909, in his „Feuilles d’Automne“ (autumn leaves) portfolio for bibliophiles, Philippe painted the intensely ornamented forms and patterns of leaves and flowers, as a sampler for craftwork motifs (ceramics, textiles, wallpaper, etc.).

Later he was attracted to creating a Flora in his own style: „Fleurs du Jura“ is the title he gave to his 150 plates and accompanying text. The work stylised plants with an almost ornamental discipline, monumentally and at the same time movingly. Despite the discipline, the plant’s inner life is felt and often pushes visibly to the surface, breaking through the borders of the picture.

Financial reasons compelled Philippe to forego publication of the Jura Flora and to lay it on one side. In those days he was very busy painting landscapes (which, as with Art Nouveau generally, is now being newly appreciated) and with commissions for large-scale murals. Perhaps his early death hindered a resumption and completion of the Jura Flora. This most remarkable work of Swiss flower painting would likely have remained unnoticed, had it not been for the firm Suchard later publishing some of the pictures (1934 and 1937).

Paul-André Robert (1901-1977), the youngest son of Paul, grew up very close to his father and was also his co-artist in the later years of the caterpillar works. In the course of his long creative life, Paul-André was active in several fields of painting. Above all he was an indefatigable researcher and outstanding botanical and zoological illustrator, who combined exactness with fine sensitivity (he was awarded an honorary doctorate for his work on dragonflies). When only 21 years old, in an astonishing achievement, he painted the plates for J. Jaccottet's book on fungi – the first of the numerous plant and animal books he was to illustrate. Unfortunately, his beautiful paintings of tropical butterflies were never used in a book. The birds which he depicted for portfolios and books show how his broad style and clear draughtsmanship differs from his father's painterly representations. Benefiting from his unusually sharp eyes, Paul-André busied himself especially with the insects, about which he also wrote books. Countless scientifically demanding documents are testament to his preference for the dragonflies and their larvae – documents that go back far into his boyhood. Of special significance is his benchmark work on dragonfly larvae, remarkably illustrated, and regarded by Paul-André as his main life's work. Sadly, it remains unpublished, because of costs.

What is the secret of the particularly strong impact of the Robert father and sons' watercolours? The impact is seen again and again in the Robert Museum. The present wave of yearning for pristine nature is not enough of an explanation. The explanation lies more in the deep dedication to the Creation, which is felt so unconditionally in the works of the three Robert naturalists – a dedication which catches the attention of the viewers. The viewer enjoys not only "pretty pictures" but is also drawn into their faith in nature, which can be a special experience. It is not without reason that we think of the manuscript illuminations by a medieval monk when we look at the meticulous, endless and minutely detailed work of the painter of caterpillars and the portrayer of insects.

The Roberts' devotion to Creation offers a guiding hand in life, rather than using nature for an artistic purpose – in other words, rather than misusing it. Perhaps unconsciously, viewers feel, and are possessed by, a sense of reverence and humility. It is as if the animals and plants were right there, being gazed at in awe.

If not pursuing scientific purposes, the traditional painting of flowers and animals wants to create something which, more or less demanding, gives pleasure, something beautiful or magnificent, etc. Basically, this approach always shows nature at the service of humankind. Quite otherwise, the Roberts felt themselves to be serving the Creator; they respect nature's dignity and work in its praise. Hence it is important to them to leave the animals and plants in their own natural settings („dans la nature“ in their book titles). When father Paul advised his son „ne t'éloigne jamais de la nature“, that was more earnestly meant than just a practical formula – it meant, what can be better created than what the Creator himself made?

So that the inner greatness of a created being can be felt, the artist heightened it by use of the format or abstraction. Thus the caterpillars and miniscule creatures take on their surreal monumentality (exaggeration of the relationship between the creature and its background) – and thus Philippe Robert combines naturalistic exactness with a formal authenticity that is more than a chance achievement.

Léopold is quoted as saying „Ma religion est celle du cœur“. That leads to the word that marks the most essential source of the Roberts' work: love, love of the Creator and his creatures. The Roberts devote themselves especially to those living beings

which most need love, namely the weak, the needy, the disdained. Hence Léopold felt himself drawn to the ordinary countryfolk and to the brigands' family members interned in Rome (of course, also to oblige a general fancy for such subjects). Hence, too, Paul takes up the caterpillars, "these worms which you contemptuously trample underfoot"; indeed, he chooses the less spectacular. Philippe, after finishing his commission to illustrate the Alpine Flora, chose for his own book the Jura Flora because, in his own words, they undeservedly languished in the shadow of the admired alpine flowers. Similarly, Paul-André dedicated himself to the small creatures – the insects, focusing his main work on dragonfly larvae, which can be regarded as particularly repulsive and yet develop into wonderful fairylike creatures. To paint birds *and* at the same time to hunt them, as did their ingenious predecessor Audubon, was unthinkable for a Robert.

Only since the Roberts' original watercolours of nature have been brought together in one collection, and can there be studied apart from other art, has it become possible to recognise their common spirit and significance. This recognition has revealed a general awakening in the interest of art historians. For a very long time it was usual to regard illustrations as simply illustrations and, therefore, most of their originals disappeared or were lost after publication. Today they are appreciated for their artistic importance.

It is a stroke of good luck, that watercolours of the three Roberts have been gradually found or unearthed and reunited in complete, or at least representative, series in a museum. There, under the most modern light protection, they should remain permanently accessible to the public.

Translation: Peter Holt