Georg Sauter and the Bridal Morning

BY ALBERT BOIME

In the spring of 1909, in what was surely one of the most curious incidents in the evolution of American art appreciation, Georg Sauter’s Bridal Morning—a prize-winning picture in the thirteenth annual exhibition of the Carnegie Art Institute in Pittsburgh—was received by the public much in the same way that Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe had been in 1863 (Fig. 1). But while Manet’s work boldly and flauntingly set forth in both form and content a revolutionary principle for French art a half-century earlier, Sauter’s painting could hardly have been indicted as a subversive aesthetic experiment in 1909. Nevertheless, Sauter’s presentation could even provoke more public outrage than any single exhibit of the notorious 1908 and 1910 shows of The Eight in New York. Even more astonishing was the fact that the primary focus of the denunciation was a standing nude seen directly from behind, her feminine charms almost completely concealed, and whose heavily impastoed and brilliantly illuminated figure all but suppressed her erotic potential. The wholly unanticipated response to this picture—especially in the light of its prize-winning status—is therefore worthy of investigation, if only to disclose the problems it implied.

Georg Sauter (1866–1937), the author of the scandalous work, has now been all but forgotten, but at the turn of the century he enjoyed an international reputation. A native of Rettenbach, Germany, he began his career as a student of the Munich Academy, but the stifling atmosphere in the Bavarian capital induced him to immigrate to London at the close of 1889. The next few years read like an

I wish to acknowledge my profound gratitude to my dear friend, the late Frau Valda Sauter, keeper of the Sauter archives in Degerndorf, West Germany, not only for her generous assistance in making available to me the records and correspondence of her husband, but for her inspired insights into his life and career as well.

1. See the Carnegie Institute, Catalogue of the Thirteenth Annual Exhibition, Pittsburgh, 1909, No. 241. Also the Carnegie Institute, Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings from Previous Exhibitions 1896–1955, Pittsburgh, 1958, non-paginated text.
2. Perhaps the closest comparison to it would be Glackens’ Nude With Apple of the 1910 show, which was pronounced by the critics as “vulgar” and “coarse,” but with hardly the vehemence that accured to the Sauter. See I. Glackens, William Glackens and the Ashcan Group, New York, 1957, p. 131.
Horatio Alger narrative. While copying in the National Gallery, he met and fell in love with Lilian Galsworthy, and their eventual marriage enabled the then unknown artist to enter the home of that solid Victorian middle-class family, which the son of the house, John Galsworthy, was to immortalize in The Forsyte Saga. In this way, Sauter came into contact with a distinguished circle of artists and men of letters, including James McNeill Whistler, Joseph Pennell—both of whom became intimate friends—G. F. Watts, Hubert Herkomer, John Lavery, James Guthrie, Joseph Conrad, John Masefield, Gilbert Murray, as well as Laurence Binyon and Campbell Dodgson, curators of the British Museum. In this ambience, Sauter fulfilled his potential and emerged at the end of the century as a leading British painter. Until the advent of World War I, he led a rich and productive existence. In addition to painting, he also found time to perform the role of critic and help establish and organize the International Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers.7

The World War, however, shattered this state, and he became conscious as never before of his bizarre status divided between two cultures, German and British. In some ways this ambivalence inspired his cosmopolitan stance: and here Sauter could identify easily with Whistler. Both his and Whistler's deep involvement with the International Society (Whistler was elected its first president and Sauter its secretary) attest in part to a need to resolve and reconcile divided sympathies. But as he had never become a naturalized British citizen, Sauter was interned—despite an eloquent petition signed by his brother-in-law and a group of distinguished artists and writers—from December 1915 until January 1917, when he was repatriated to Germany. He never fully recovered from what subsequently proved to be an embittering experience, and his later works bear the scars of the trauma of his internment.

In many ways, the Bridal Morning of 1902 is an amalgam of the turn-of-the-century styles displayed in the exhibitions of the International Society. It also bears testimony to Sauter's cosmopolitan breadth. And it owes an obvious debt to Whistler in its sonorous rhythms and silhouetting of the compositional masses. At the same time, it demonstrates the influence of impressionism, as is evident in the richly variegated surface and pulsating energies, and in its attention to the brilliant morning sunlight effect. But this is no simple scene drawn from immediate experience; a profound sadness and breathtaking stillness pervades the atmosphere of this picture—in striking contrast with the glittering and exuberant orchestration of light and color. A haunting, supernatural mood is felt; we sense being confronted with a visionary experience in which the figures are revealed as the presentiment of a supersensuous, unknown world. Its sense of poetic mystery is reminiscent of the idealist trends prevalent in Europe at the end of the century, and that were in many ways dramatically in opposition to the realist ethos of impressionism. Sauter's picture partakes of pre-Raphaelism and G. F. Watts, of Puvis de Chavannes and Aman-Jean, of Fritz von Uhde and Max Klinger. At the same time, it extends further the idealists' fascination with the Quattrocento: the monumental figures shown in coordinate views reflect the author's admiration for Piero della Francesca. Yet, almost magically, Sauter has

8. Fennell, op. cit., pp. 409, 417; H. Pearson, The Man Whistler, New York, 1952, p. 253. Sauter and Whistler had a deep rapport; since they shared ambivalent feelings about their adopted land, it was only in each other's company that they felt natural. They talked privately about the Boer War, and it was in the company of Sauter, that Whistler, having made sure they were alone in the Franz Hals gallery in the Mauritshuis, abandoned himself to an enthusiastic display over the Dutch master's work.

9. G. Sauter, "The International Society," op. cit., pp. 119–120. Sauter wrote that the International Society provided the channel for the "denationalisation of art" and charged the Royal Academy as being "national."


"A clergyman wrote to point out the wanton wickedness of the picture, and suggested that the picture be called 'Eve,' and that the nude figure might well be covered by the enveloping coils of a serpent."

"Still another critic of the painting suggests that the nude effect might still be preserved in a harmless way by making the lady a mermaid standing on her tail."

"Another correspondent writes that the picture suggests a lady ready for her bath, and a diagram was submitted showing how a fine hose might be played upon the figure in such a way as to be appropriate and clothe the figure with decency."

"Since every humble and devoted lover regards his bride as little short of an angel, the artist might well cover up the nudity with large angel's wings."

harmonized the polarities of impressionism and idealism, the immediate and the remote, the real and the ideal, the intimate and the monumental, and stamped the whole with the unmistakable force of his personality.

Certainly, the jury of the Carnegie Institute considered it a remarkable work and awarded it the silver prize of one thousand dollars.\textsuperscript{13} But following the public exhibition in April, Sauter’s painting was singled out by the public and subjected to declamatory attacks. On May 2, the New York \textit{American} reported that 29,000 Pittsburghers were making such a concerted protest over the painting, that the Carnegie Art Institute might have to remove it despite the award it received.\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, the office of the director, John W. Beatty, was inundated with demands that either the painting be removed or the gallery closed.\textsuperscript{15} A tabloid, the \textit{American Examiner}, ran a two-page spread on the affair, entitled “Too Horrid for Pittsburgh! [sic],” and described the many reactions of the city’s outraged public.\textsuperscript{16} Beneath a caricatured version of Sauter’s painting showing a serpent entwining the protagonist, the caption read: “A clergyman wrote to point out the wanton wickedness of the picture, and suggested that the picture be called ‘Eve,’ and that the nude figure might well be covered by the encircling coils of a serpent.”\textsuperscript{17} Another complaint held that “the association of nudity with the marriage ceremony . . . is particularly repugnant to modesty.”\textsuperscript{18} The public, sustaining the acute pressures of a puritanical heritage, was still too sensitized to the subject matter to take a sensible stand toward works of art (Figs. 2–5).\textsuperscript{19}

But even from today’s point of view, it is difficult to understand what all the commotion was about—and here I am neither referring to radical changes in our attitudes toward pictorial content nor even toward sexuality and the display of the nude body. Indeed, in the very same show, a work by Emile René Ménard, \textit{The Judgment of Paris} (although “edified” by mythological trappings) was far more suggestive than Sauter’s picture.\textsuperscript{20} Not even the most conservative spectator of the period could assert a defensible criticism of the \textit{Bridal Morning} based on

\textsuperscript{13} It had also been well received before that in London, Munich, Bremen, Berlin, Hanover, Brussels and Antwerp. See Stumpf, op. cit., p. 124.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Unsigned article, “Too Horrid for Pittsburgh!,” \textit{The American Examiner}, n.d., extracted pages in the Sauter archives with the following copyright mark at the top: “Copyright, 1909 by American Examiner. Great Britain Rights Reserved.” The subhead read: “How ‘The Bridal Morning,’ the Prize-Winning Painting in the Carnegie Art Competition, has Upset the Whole City.”

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{20} Carnegie Institute, \textit{Catalogue, op. cit.}, No. 185. It is true that two years prior, Gaston La Touche’s \textit{The Bath}—a prize-winner in the 1907 International—agitated the public because of its indecorous nude subject. But while more suggestive than the Sauter, the controversy it aroused was far less intense. During the showing of the Sauter, the \textit{Pittsburgh Gazette-Times} noted on May 3 that for three hours it was impossible to get near the picture, and that a guard stood by warning the public “to keep their hands off the canvas.” See the unsigned article, “Greatest Crowd at ‘The Bridal Morning,” \textit{Pittsburgh Gazette-Times}, May 3, 1909.
the grounds of obscenity. As mentioned earlier, the erotic potential of the nude is totally negated by the pictorial context; but this suppression is reinforced as well by the thematic presentation. In this world of profound silence and melancholy, the nude bride-to-be participates by hiding all emotion from the spectator, and draws her body up stiffly in an archaizing columnar shape. Her figure lacks the sinuosity and piqceancy of contour, as well as the polished highlighted flesh exploited by such popular French artists of the time as La Touche and Chabas, whose work was reproduced widely in America.21 Here the columnar figural shape is densely covered with pigment freely applied that obliterates the sense of flesh; we become aware of light above all, and its dazzling play over the surface of the picture. We may thus conclude that it was more than the simple presence of the nude that disturbed the public so profoundly.

When the artist learned of the scandal his picture occasioned, he was flabbergasted; he attempted hastily to put down in writing the "meaning" of his pictorial conception and communicated it to Beatty.22 Sauter described his work as a "symbolical picture" having nothing to do with a specific ceremony or a specific place or time. To him it represented "the morning of joy and sorrow and anxiety in the life of the woman (sic)—the day when she enters into her real mission in life to become the mother of a race." He explained the figure's nudity as a sign of chastity and purity, and was deeply hurt by the fact that the American public had attached an opposite interpretation to this figure. In one place he noted: "the picture simply embodies a thought or idea in form and color." He found it difficult to imagine that his emphasis on color and light and the exigencies of pictorial form could permit the spectator erotic thoughts or indulge his pornographic instincts.

Certainly, the jury's enthusiastic response to Sauter's work confirmed his aesthetic intention, and the publication of his interpretation in a local newspaper attest to an official support of the Bridal Morning.23 Now the Carnegie Institute was by no means an outlet for the avant-garde. While it did show the Impressionists, it should be recalled that by 1909 they were eminently respectable, and what is more they represented what Sloan called "eyesight painting," a kind of naturalism perfectly suited to the practical, extroverted, literal-minded American audience of the period.24 A glance at the annual catalogues of the Carnegie shows in this period reveals that the institution supported primarily fashionable modernists—artists who exploited a bravura technique and strong light effects but who adhered to a conservative formal approach and relied on fairly traditional themes. Artists like Thomas Eakins, John La Farge, E. W. Redfield, Childe Hassam and William

21. Chabas' most notorious work, September Morn, was painted in 1912, and millions of Americans bought reproductions of it either in calendar form or as decorative prints. See unsigned article, "September Morn," the Art Digest, Vol. II, June 1, 1937, p. 4.
22. See the rough draft for this letter in the Sauter archives. The interpretation was subsequently published in a local paper. See An Artist: "Bridal Morning. A Local Artist Discusses the Merit and Motif of the Painting," The Pittsburgh Dispatch, June 13, 1909. Undoubtedly, this article was written by John W. Beatty.
23. Ibid. The author claimed that the work ranked in importance with Whistler's Srasate—the Institute's first acquisition in 1896.
Merritt Chase sat on juries that selected painters such as Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, Alfred H. Maurer, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Jacques-Emile Blanche, Jean Boldini, Henri Martin, Fritz Thaulow, Franz Stuck and Hendrik Mesdag.\textsuperscript{25} Edmund C. Tarbell won first prize in 1909; Le Sidaner captured second place in 1908, and the year before that Gaston La Touche took the first prize. The fact that along with Tarbell, the 1909 jury selected Sauter as the last word in modernity, i.e., that their work exemplified the aspirations of its members, best testifies to the Carnegie outlook. While Sauter’s work reflected advanced ideas in light and color, it also attached itself to the dignity of the human figure and implied—the artist’s own comments notwithstanding—an ethical intent. A contemporary art historian at the University of Pittsburgh, who disliked the work, guessed that the jury’s choice was based on the fact that there was “something new in the technical treatment.”\textsuperscript{26} Others were impressed by its “sensational coloring,” although one conservative critic condemned it as “a formless, amateurish daub.”\textsuperscript{27} But it was undoubtedly the heightened sense of technique and color joined to the monumentalized figural treatment that appealed to the jury.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, who self-consciously exploited a slapdash technique to convey a sense of spontaneity, Sauter used broken brushwork to catch the radiant sunlight and its myriad hues glancing through the window and filling the interior like a blazon of pyrotechnics. This illumination is crucial to the artist’s thematic intent; it throws into solemn relief the monumentalized figures of the three protagonists. Posed against the vivacious play of light and color, the sharply silhouetted figures in their solemn and stately positions assume—by way of contrast—an even more melancholy aspect. Rather than serve as an artificial sign of modernity, Sauter’s impressionistic technique contributes to his humanistic conception.

Still another fresh aspect of Sauter’s picture is the fact that his “symbolical” context constitutes neither a stereotyped allusion nor yet an updated version of a sacred or profane theme. It reveals instead a highly original allegorical approach, for which the materials are extracted from the contemporary world. Again, what is most intriguing about this work is the taut equilibrium it maintains between allegory and modernity, the real and the ideal: setting, technique and figural types breathe the air of contemporaneity, while at the same time fuse mysteriously to create a world of timeless, classical idealization.

But while these features may have projected the work favorably to the jury, the picture’s rather unexpected admixture of pictorial eclecticism and original invention contributed to the spectator’s discomfited response in 1909. Perhaps it is within this context that the nude figure proved so irritating. The contemporary viewer could understand a nude Venus and even appreciate a contemporary nude lounging indecorously in her boudoir, but it somehow found intolerable this

\textsuperscript{25} Occasionary, a more controversial artist would be selected, but his entry might be of a different controversial nature than his general production, e.g., Ryder’s The White Horse, which was also exhibited in 1909. See Carnegie Institute, Catalogue, op. cit., No. 239.

\textsuperscript{26} American Examinor, loc. cit.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.; unsigned article, “Founder’s Day in Prophecy,” The Pittsburgh Dispatch, April 30, 1909.

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dignified and solemn nude participating in a sacred event. She neither used her charms to arouse erotic thoughts nor to bear witness to the Arcadian past. Indeed, her nudity must have appeared entirely inexplicable. Her tense and sober posture in the rather sanctified contemporary setting elevated her figure to a level where the normative associations attached to nudity in art seemed wholly irrelevant. The resulting frustration of the spectator’s psychological anticipation inevitably vented itself in a virulent diatribe against the simple presence of the nude. Confronted with the dazzling complexities of Sauter’s picture, the spectator seized upon the nude as the one sure thing susceptible to direct criticism.

There were other significant factors contributing to the disquieting effect of this work upon the spectator. The proximity of the proportionately large nude to the foreground plane makes her seem close enough to touch, and this feature combined with the fact that she is seen from behind while engaged in an intimate ritual, invites him to look on as a kind of voyeur. Furthermore, the profound sense of melancholy pervading this picture leads the spectator to view the event as tragic: as if the transition from maidenhood to bridehood were to be taken as a mournful occasion. An air of resignation and surrender hangs over the protagonists, and the figures stand stiffly erect as if in dreadful anticipation of something final and ineluctable. The mother at the right approaches her daughter like a high priestess performing a sacrificial rite. Here the daughter’s nudity and exposure point up her vulnerability and defenselessness.

Sauter’s painting manifests Victorian attitudes toward the male-female relationship; attitudes that were reflected in Samuel Butler’s exposure of Christina in The Way of All Flesh and condemned by Galsworthy’s The Forsyte Saga. Not fortuitously, in the first decade of this century, world-wide agitation for the abolition of the double standard of morals for the sexes was raging, as well as demands for equal rights for women.28 In this country American feminists—inspired by the writings of Ellen Key and Charlotte Perkins Gilman—advocated revolt against the conventional marriage institution.29 Contrasts were drawn between the instinctive ideals of young women and the sordid realities of conjugality that not only corrupted feminine virtue but that broke up “the strong, pure stream of woman’s energy into a thousand little stagnant canals.”30 The feminist grievances were summed up in the movement’s “Declaration of Sentiments,” which declared: “[Man] has made [woman], if married, in the eyes of the law, civilly dead.” It also emphasized that a married woman is deprived “of all rights,” and forced to lead “a dependent and abject life.”31

29. F. Dell, Women as World Builders: Studies in Modern Feminism, Chicago, 1913, pp. 22ff., 76 ff. Mrs. Gilman’s feelings are perhaps revealed in these lines: “We toil to keep the altar crowned / with dishes new and nice, / And Art and Love, and Time and Truth, / We offer up, with Health and Youth / In Daily Sacrifice.” (Ibid., p. 26.) Ellen Key, who was Swedish, exercised a profound impact on American feminists with such controversial writings as Love and Marriage.
30. Ibid., p. 27.
But while these sentiments were prevalent at the time, the fact that they took the form of a confidential revelation in Sauter’s painting must have had something to do with the public’s response. The nude protagonist and her lack of stereotyped allusions presented an explicit—and therefore painful—image of “the-lamb-being-led-to-the-slaughter” idea, thus pointing up the feminist view of marriage as an act of self-sacrifice. In 1909 America, Victorian attitudes were mirrored in what Santayana characterized as “the genteel tradition,” an Anglo-Saxon heritage whose paradigm expression was to be found in the dominant New England culture. This tradition profoundly influenced ideas about art; indeed, art was confused with conventional politeness and delicacy—it was meant to be more an adornment than an organic expression of life. In short, tacit considerations of taste and decorum colored judgments of works of art—considerations that affected both professionals and laymen alike. The Carnegie Art Institute awarded prizes to fairly conservative figure painters who could also charm by their technical freedom and their bold use of color. While official taste judged Sauter’s picture in terms of handling and treatment of the human figure, public taste regarded it from the viewpoint of subject content. In this both were guided by a priori considerations of what art should be about—and ultimately, both sectors missed the rich aesthetic merit of this painting and its internal complexities.

It was this state of cultural innocence that the Armory Show, opening just four years later, shattered so effectively, and in the process disclosed the need for a real spirit of revolt among American artists. It rent the veil of hypocrisy demonstrated in the public response to Sauter’s painting, and signaled a significant shift in taste toward a more genuine modernism. Curiously, this momentous event occurred on the eve of World War I, which dealt an effective end to the equally sanctimonious Belle Epoque culture in Europe. And while European artists like Sauter sustained the traumatic impact of a war, which together with its aftermath retarded European art for nearly four decades, American artists increasingly became the proponents of radicalism and innovation. Sauter’s work and the response it engendered recall a borderline phase in the development of western art, and indeed, seemed to have served as a kind of nexus for the stilted sentiments that marked the close of an era in European and American culture. Significantly, its own powerful statement and artistic verity provide a touchstone for an understanding of this transition.

33. It is curious that Virginia Woolf assigned as the great “date” of change in world culture and a shift toward a new conception of individuality “about the year 1910.” See A. Mauirois, *Aspects of Biography*, Cambridge, 1929, pp. 9-10.
34. There is a happy postscript to the events surrounding the *Bridal Morning*. The year following the Armory Show, the city of Pittsburgh established a traveling exhibition to cross the United States in an effort to expunge the notorious reputation accruing to the public reception of some Carnegie exhibits. It wished to demonstrate that, far from being “materialistic,” it had a strong “artistic side” and to prove this it sent out paintings in a magnificently equipped train—“a true traveling art gallery.” Among them was Sauter’s *Bridal Morning*, now considered “a Pittsburgh Ideal in art.”