

Arnold Böcklin, *Island of the Dead* [*Die Toteninsel*] (1883)

Abstract

Island of the Dead, arguably the most widely recognized of Arnold Böcklin's (1827-1901) paintings, appeared in multiple versions. Perhaps as a way to maximize his audience, Böcklin made this painting just ambiguous enough, infusing it with precisely the right amount of dread to open up numerous readings. (The title was supplied by Böcklin's savvy art dealer in Berlin, Fritz Gurlitt.) The gambit worked: it has been alleged that, between 1885 and 1900, no good bourgeois home was without a reproduction of this or another of his paintings. At a time when historical interpretations of German nationhood were highly prized – despite (but also because of) the onset of a certain post-unification ennui that afflicted the younger generation – the romantic combination of melancholy, mystery, and timelessness encapsulated in this painting may have appealed to Germans in search of colossal dreamscapes made to order. In this respect, the Italy that Böcklin and other “German-Romans” depicted in their works symbolized a mythical Germany in which pure emotion and ideal beauty still prevailed. One can also understand Böcklin's appeal for a generation that had embraced Wagnerian worlds of myth, nature, and the cult of the hero. But not everyone bought into this: Böcklin also had detractors who found his art decadent and unhealthy. After he was firmly established in the art world (especially after a special exhibit of his work was mounted in honor of his 70th birthday in 1897), humor magazines often depicted the fears of traditionalist art critics as nightmares filled with Böcklin-like motifs.

Source



Source: Arnold Böcklin, *Die Toteninsel* [*Island of the Dead*]. Painting (1883). Original: Nationalgalerie, SMB.

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