

Arnold Böcklin, *Self-Portrait with Death playing the Fiddle* (1872)

Abstract

Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) was best known for his unreal, dreamlike scenes, which anticipated aspects of Surrealism while drawing heavily on classical mythology. Böcklin left his native Switzerland to train at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art in the 1840s; from 1850 to 1857, he lived and worked in Rome; thereafter, he returned to Italy numerous times, spending about 30 years there altogether. His reputation spread only slowly, in large part because his land- and seascapes were so full of mythical creatures (nymphs, mermaids, centaurs, and so on) that they were considered excessive, eccentric, and downright bizarre. Beginning in the 1880s, when etchings of his works were marketed to middle-class audiences, his paintings began to catch on. Böcklin also profited greatly from the efforts of Ferdinand Avenarius, the founder of *Der Kunstwart* and an admirer of his work. By the time of his death, Böcklin was being hailed as one of the most original and creative German artists of the *fin de siècle*; and, in retrospect, it can be said that his interest in imaginary scenes, liberated from traditional forms and motifs, prepared the ground for Expressionism. That Böcklin “struck a different sort of chord” can be interpreted both figuratively and literally: according to Gustav Mahler’s widow Alma, the scherzo movement of Mahler’s Symphony No. 4 in G Major (1900) was inspired by the image of Death playing the fiddle in this self-portrait. In keeping with the spirit of the canvas, Mahler had the violin soloist play on an improperly tuned violin [*scordatura*].

Source



Source: Arnold Böcklin, *Selbstbildnis mit fiedelndem Tod* [*Self-Portrait with Death playing the Fiddle*]. Painting (1872). Original: Nationalgalerie, SMB.

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Recommended Citation: Arnold Böcklin, Self-Portrait with Death playing the Fiddle (1872), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:image-1321>> [April 28, 2024].