



Capturing idyllic Switzerland

Inspired by rural Switzerland, American-born folk artist Betsy Ross Koller recounts for *Swiss News* her journey from impressionable expatriate to celebrated, naïve-style painter of idyllic Swiss country life scenes, which can be viewed at galleries in Gstaad and Hermance.

By Mary Krienke | It never occurred to Betsy Ross Koller when she moved to Geneva and discovered Swiss folk art that she would one day become a reputed Swiss folk artist in her own right. Captivated by images of rural Swiss life in the Berner Oberland – like the elaborately decorated, geranium-festooned farmhouses, and neat pastoral scenes populated with complacent cows and snow-capped mountains looming on the horizon – she set out to capture what she saw on canvas.

“You might say that I fell in love with traditional Switzerland and wanted to be a part of it,” she says, from her present home in Naples, Florida.

Yet prior to arriving in Switzerland with her husband Paul in 1964, Koller had never even seriously considered a career as a painter. “I always thought I would be a singer and/or writer,” she says.

Her affection for Swiss folk art, however, led her to painting lessons with a teacher in Geneva. She proved a quick study and even sold some of her paintings to fellow classmates. “Then, with what in retrospect was great wisdom, my teacher suggested I go off on my own and develop my own style,” she recalls.

Forging ahead

Koller did just that. Her breakthrough came in the mid-’80s, when galleries in Morges, Gstaad and Geneva began exhibiting her work, and she entered painting contests in the United States, winning “best of show” at a Howard Chandler Christie art exhibition in McConnelville, Ohio.

She says that she was initially surprised by her success. “I painted mainly for my own pleasure,” she explains. Her

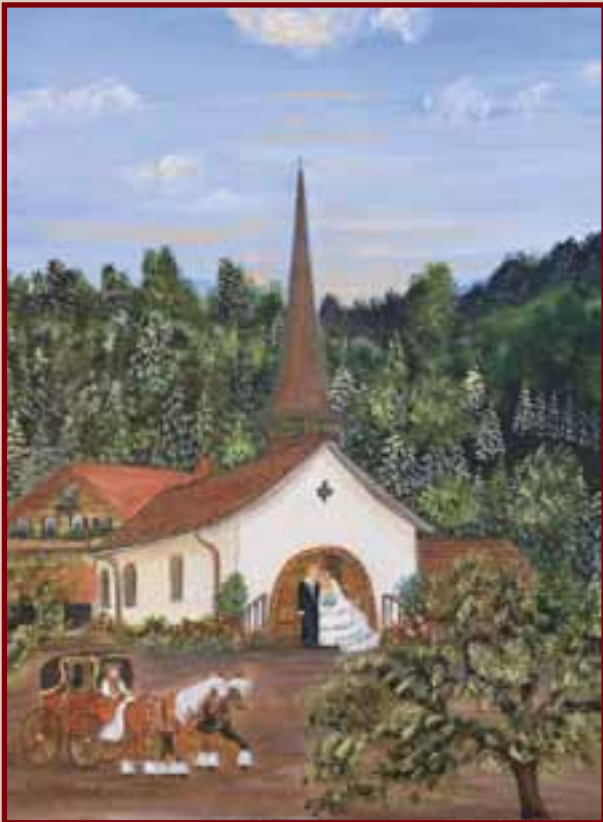
first big solo show in the United States – in 1985 at the Zanesville Art Museum in Zanesville, Ohio – was a huge success and resulted in the museum’s purchase of her *Morgan County Fair* painting for its permanent collection. Today that painting hangs alongside one by Grandma Moses, the iconic American primitive artist.

On her own terms

While her work is frequently compared to that of Grandma Moses, Koller resists classification.

“My style is harder to define,” she insists. “I actually start out quite impressionistic, but wind up more naïve. I don’t know where that comes from and neither do the critics.”

Whatever the tag, her cheerful, idealised paintings of times less complicated than these, rendered in clear, bright



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colours, have an uplifting effect.

“That’s probably why so many doctors, lawyers, banks and other institutions buy my art,” she says. “I’m a very upbeat person, even when things aren’t so sunny. I try to put that across.”

Homecoming

Koller was born and grew up in rural Ohio. The daughter of a veterinarian who specialised in horses, it’s easy to see why she immediately identified with rural Swiss farm life.

“It was almost like going home,” she recalls, of her relocation to Switzerland. “I found the paintings of the Swiss folk artists so insightful of how they thought about their animals and their land... about who they were.”

Koller is a Colonial Dame – a member of the society open only to those with American ancestry that predates 1700 – and regularly returns to her farm in Ohio. With such strong ties to both her distant and more immediate past, it’s not surprising that she related to the “deep roots” of the people she encountered in the Berner Oberland.

“What I love about the rural Swiss is the way they transmit their lifestyle – their costumes and traditions – from generation to generation,” says the ancestor of Betsy Ross, 18th-century designer of the American flag.

“That feeling hit me when I was young and impressionable and new to Switzerland. It is that feeling that I set out to capture in my art,” she adds.

Upcoming show in Gstaad

When I talked with Koller in October, she was putting the final touches on the last of some 30 paintings (including those illustrated on these pages), which will be

showcased at the Adler Gallery in Gstaad from December 22 through January 30.

“This is my seventh show with the Adlers, who represent me on a permanent basis and recently exhibited my work in Hong Kong,” she says, of the gallery that has featured her work since 1990.

Franklin Adler, chairman of Bijouterie Adler SA, whose Gstaad establishment is part chic jewellery store, part art gallery, says Koller is the reason he got into the art business. “I liked her and I liked her work so we started exhibiting together,” he says, recalling their first meeting. “Betsy’s a happy person and a



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happy painter. She wakes up the child in us. That's something we need today."

One cannot imagine a more ideal venue for her paintings than Gstaad, where they hang inside many of the very chalets they depict. The timing of the exhibition is designed so that those who spend their winter holidays in Gstaad and fall in love with their surroundings, as Koller did, can take one of her paintings home as a memento.

Many of the works to be displayed by Adler depict local Swiss scenes. One fea-

tures a bride and groom emerging from one of the many charming chapels in the region, captured by Koller during a chance encounter on a recent visit. There are also portraits of Swiss cows named Mona, Lisa and Bella, as well as some goats. And several paintings are nostalgic scenes of rural Middle America.

At home in Hermance

Koller's art is also on permanent display at the Artisanat Suisse shop in Hermance, near Geneva, where proprietor Margareth

Büchi recently turned a former storage room into a gallery devoted exclusively to Swiss art.

Büchi has exhibited Koller's work for more than 15 years – with great success. "I used to show her paintings upstairs – in my living room – but since March they have their proper space," she says.

Her shop and gallery are the best source of quality Swiss crafts and folk art in the Geneva area. Among her authentic selections are dozens of *découpages* – those incredibly intricate paper cuttings by Nelli Naef that depict traditional Swiss scenes in silhouette.

Swiss success

The fact that Koller's paintings resonate with the Swiss is one of her greatest satisfactions.

"My clients are mostly Swiss but, of course, Americans and other Europeans also buy my work," she says.

Among her many fans was Morris Abrams, the late United States Permanent Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, who was an enthusiastic collector of naïve art and had purchased several of her works.

An encounter with Sadako Ogata, then head of the UN High Commissioner of Refugees, at a dinner party hosted by the ambassador in 1990, led to an association with UNICEF, which continues to this day.

"Madame Ogata noticed one of my paintings and asked, 'Who painted that?' Fortunately, I was able to answer that question and the following day I received a call from UNICEF saying they would like to see my work. From that moment on, I have offered UNICEF reproduction rights for my paintings and many have appeared on their greeting cards." In 1996, UNICEF chose Koller's *Buchanan Square* for the cover of its 50th-anniversary catalogue.

Following a vernissage of her work at UBS in Vevey, Nestlé approached her for reproduction rights to use on holiday packaging for its Cailler brand of chocolates, an affiliation that lasted for several years.

Koller also wrote and illustrated three children's books, based on her own childhood experiences with her blind horse Black Beauty and its "seeing eye" horse called Rock. "The books not only show my art but show where my art comes from: my heart," she says.

View more at: www.betsyrosskoller.com