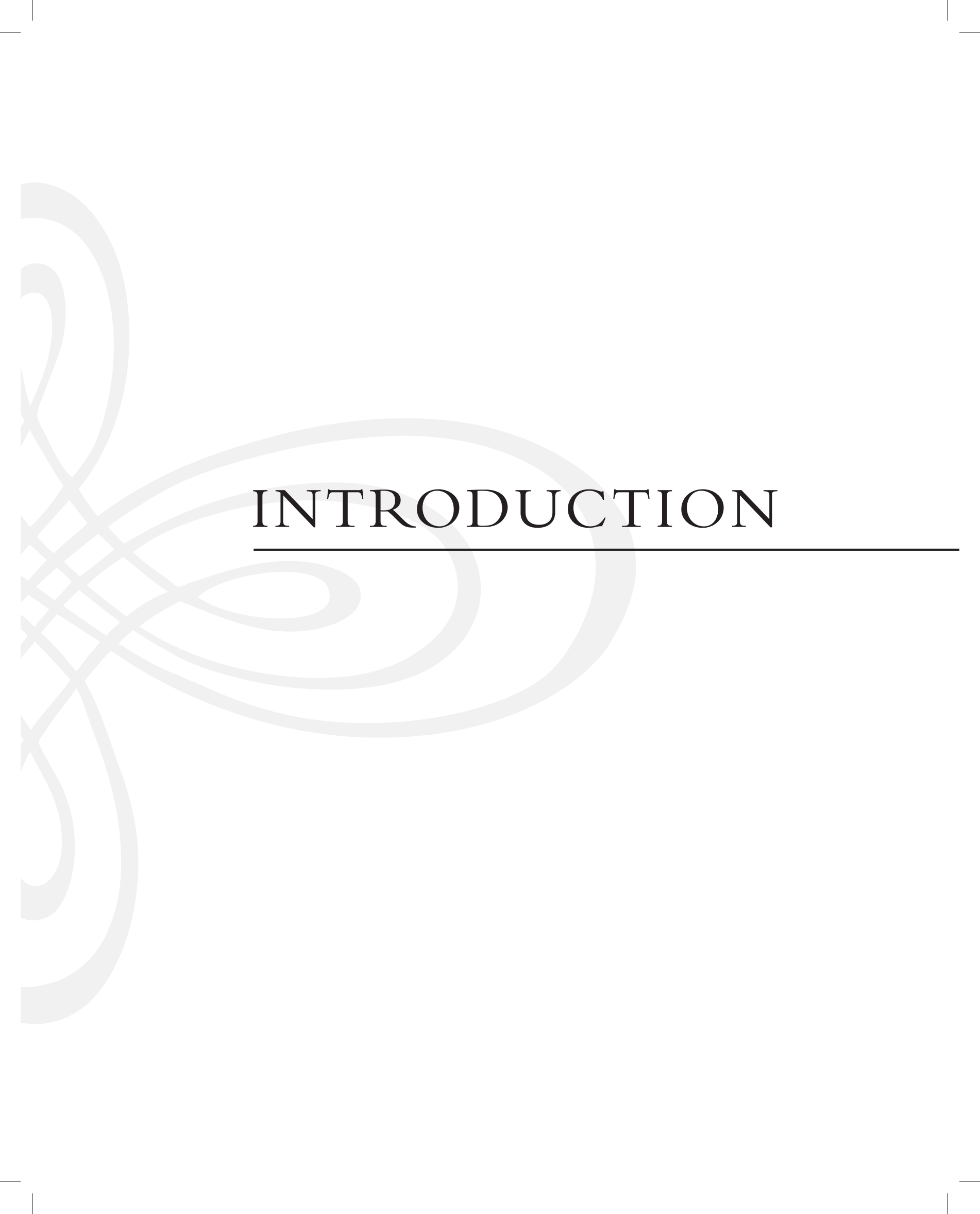






INTRODUCTION



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Rediscovery of One of the Most Important Swiss Landscape and Portrait Painters

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The life and the artistic works of the Swiss painter Julius Voegtli (1879–1944) are most closely associated with his hometown Biel (Bienne in French) in western Switzerland. After Geneva, Biel is the second-largest bilingual city in Switzerland; virtually all its native inhabitants speak German as well as French, and all schools, municipal departments, and public institutions are bilingual. Voegtli, his family, and his neighbors were comfortable in both languages and cultures. For the painter, his contact with and relationships to his art friends in Germany and France went beyond language and territorial constraints and were a matter of course.

His hometown, which lies in the Swiss canton of Bern along the shores of Lake Biel, is by no means a remote provincial town, but rather, is considered the global watch capital. Nowhere in the world are more watches produced than in Biel. It is here that the Swatch Group has its headquarters and the largest production facility of Rolex is located. The watch industry gives the town an international flair. Watch builders no longer come just from the local countryside but from the entire world, not the least of them from India and China. Even Voegtli's work had a great deal to do with Swiss watches. The painter was not only active as an artist but also as a teacher at an arts and crafts school in Biel. In addition, he privately taught painting. The renowned painter Mili Weber had taken private lessons from Voegtli. Further, he was a long-term member of the Biel municipal council and enjoyed great success as a communal politician. During his tenure, the Swiss watch crisis occurred: As a result of the

Julius Voegtli, 1900

1929 American stock market crash, virtually the entire foreign business for the watchmakers in the region collapsed within a matter of weeks. During this time, Voegtli ironically managed to entice the American car manufacturer General Motors to invest in the region. Consequently, the company built an assembly plant for cars such as Opel, Chevrolet, and Buick in Biel. Rolex, Omega, and other international watch companies followed suit and contributed immensely to the rapid Swiss economic recovery after World War II.

The Swiss reformers viewed the economic and social success of the believers as a testimony of God's righteousness. Therefore, they believed that it was good and right to first strive for earthly profit and then collect merits to attain spiritual salvation.

Thanks to its resolute peace and neutrality policies, multi-cultural Switzerland was spared the travails of the two world wars in the 20th century. The country was also cut off from the significant changes occurring in early 20th-century art. Meanwhile, Swiss artists chose their own paths: Famous painters like Ferdinand Hodler, Arnold Böcklin, and Paul Klee discovered symbolism as a specific form of expression, and some like Voegtli went the other way, staying true to the tradition of the old masters, and remained wholly detached from international trends, movements, and directions.



Julius Voegtli, 1882

Voegtli was born in March 1879 in the western Swiss town of Malters as the son of a general practitioner. His parents were reformed Christians, both highly educated and art- and music-loving; from Voegtli's early childhood, they nurtured the artistic talents of their son. He attended high school in Solothurn and, upon graduation, studied art at the Biel College of Technology, which was closely aligned with the watch workshops of the town. He received further training as a decorative painter at the Basel Industrial School and as a trainee in Basel.

At the time, the Swiss vocational training system was considered the best of its kind in Europe. Voegtli received his artistic education at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. There, he mainly focused on landscape painting and was fascinated by French impressionist masters, such as Cezanne.

In 1906, he finally returned to his Swiss homeland and, together with his friend Rolf Riesen, opened a painting decoration store. Henceforth, he had two vocations, between which he carefully distinguished: "decorative painter"

and “artist.” The differentiation between “occupation” and “calling” corresponds to a work–life balance model still practiced by quite a few artists and intellectuals in Switzerland. It has its roots in Zwingli’s and Calvin’s doctrine of justification.

Voegtli was recognized for his work as a decorative painter; furthermore, he made quite a name for himself as a landscape designer and city planner. Eventually, he became Biel’s commissioner for public works and industry. He ensured that after overcoming the watch crisis, the town refurbished its appearance with the construction of elegant new structures built in a modernistic Bauhaus style. The architects were Jewish artists from the Bauhaus milieu in Dessau and Weimar, who had fled the Nazis and escaped to Switzerland.

For his public services, Voegtli received a great deal of recognition during his lifetime. As a decorative painter, which was his bread-and-butter job, he is still ever-present today in his homeland. Above all, his commissioned works, such as frescos in city halls and churches, stairs, fountains, public pools, and baths, are considered exemplary in Swiss art and architectural history.

Recognition for Voegtli as an “artist” is an entirely different matter. His paintings mostly remained the private property of his heirs and were hardly noticed by the public at large. One must thank Voegtli’s grandson, Hans Vögtli, and his family that in 2007, more than 60 years after his death, verified Swiss works of his were recorded and documented for the first time in a catalog. The German art critic Helmut Orpel reported on this directory in a German art magazine and, with his well-informed article, aroused the curiosity of the Hamburg-residing gallery owner and art dealer Nour Nouri. Nouri, as an art expert, is always on the lookout for new artistic discoveries and, thereupon, contacted Voegtli’s grandson. The two quickly became friends and partners as they both shared the same passion for the paintings of the unfairly forgotten master and, from this time on, worked closely together on researching and developing the artistic legacy of Voegtli. He was anything but a hobby and leisure painter. According to the testimony of his wife, relatives, and friends, he dedicated himself to his art with the same amount of devotion and passion as he did to his bread-and-butter vocation of decorative painting.



Karl Voegtli, Julius Voegtli's brother, 1900

From left to right: His brother-in-law Josef Burri, his niece Elsi Burri, Julius Voegtli, 1900





93 Two Vases with Geraniums
Aquarelle on paper
18 x 28 cm
Early 20th Cent.



89 Max our Entlebucher (Alpine Dog Breed)
Charcoal Drawing on paper
40 x 54 cm
Late 19th - Early 20th Cent.

Even when subject to tremendous pressure and strain, he would not put his “painting utensils” – brushes, oil and watercolors, and carefully selected canvases – aside. At the onset of the last century and at the beginning of his artistic development, flowers were among his preferred motives. On the one hand, in these works, the influence of impressionism, which he encountered in his studies in Munich, is evident; on the other hand, undoubtedly, the painter was also under the spell of the floral splendor of his homeland. The area around Biel is known for its almost Provencal or Mediterranean-like flora. With the meticulousness of a master watchmaker who possessed a manual precision and great attention to detail, he painted the flowers that grow, bloom, and flourish around Lake Biel: poppies, French daisies, windflowers, zinnias, peonies, phlox, snapdragons, dahlias, carnations, gladiolas and, again and again, roses. Like the Dutch masters, every bouquet of flowers needed an appropriate vase – usually in bright green or blue – and a colorful or blue ceiling. Simultaneously, still life images of pewter mugs, cups, teapots, apples, grapes, onions, cucumbers, cabbages, turnips, and even a violin were painted. They are depictions and symbols of silent happiness, domestic security, and life affirmation and open to the piety of a universe that sees in the smallest things a sign that everything God has created is good and beautiful. “...Narcissus and the tulip fair are clothed in raiment far rarer than Solomon in splendor...” is a line from the choral hymn “Go forth my heart, and seek delight” by Paul Gerhardt that the painter liked to quote and often depict in his joyful frescos.

With the same passionate commitment, he painted the animals of his surroundings, primarily using watercolors. It is interesting to note that Voegtli did not make use of any Swiss cliché in his work: You will never find leaping chamois or bell-laden cows on mountain pastures. The animals he depicted in smaller formats are closely associated with humans and are shown serving humankind: horses assisting a farmer, a plow horse pulling a heavy wagon or carriage, a carthorse in full harness, and a pony out on the field. As a 20-year-old, he had already created artistic tributes for domesticated dogs and cats.

On these aquarelles, humans and animals coexist in a pre-industrial manner. The animals are not merely objects but partners and equals at eye level. In the painting “Horses on a Field,” this observation can even be taken literally. The art critic Orpel asserts that Voegtli’s landscape paintings are the most impressive of all of his work. Snow-covered peaks, glistening glaciers,

and epic ravines are not his subject matter at all. Therefore, he is deliberately at odds with Swiss genre paintings. He does paint the Matterhorn, one of the highest alpine mountains, but the format (18 by 24 cm) is relatively small and reduces the distinctive peak to a more human-like dimension. Much larger (114 by 200 cm) is the “St. Peter’s Island” painting, which shows an architectural jewel in the mellow, almost Toscana-like landscape along Lake Biel, accentuated by an almost austere, late-summer atmosphere. The blue-gray of the lake water, the changing iridescence of light, the dark tones of the surrounding trees, and the golden brown of the harvested fields blend into a symphony of colors. Just as masterly is his 1933 city picture of Florence, which creates an intriguing and magical appeal through its reflection of the traditional Florentine buildings and bridges on the water surface of Arno.



8 Lattigen on Lake Biel
(as seen from his studio)
 Aquarelle on paper
 37 x 50 cm
 Early 20th Cent.

Numerous motifs of his landscape paintings are based on the painter’s immediate surroundings. Particularly impressive are his depictions of old farmsteads with their mighty pyramidal roofs consisting of gray shingles. They were built this way to ensure that the snow does not remain on the roofs during winters. These were present everywhere in the proximity of his home: Lake Biel, the small towns of Klingnau and Murten, the orchards in the canton of Bern, and the deciduous forest near Hospental. Voegtli found picturesque locations in accordance with his ideals; wild, untamed nature did not appeal to him. He always looked for harmony between humans and nature. The human structures, churches, city halls, watch workshops, and, in particular, the elegant railroad bridges harmoniously intertwine with the landscape. Nature and culture complement each other. For me, his portraits are among the most impressive documents of Voegtli’s artistic oeuvre. His self-portrait from 1907, when he was 28 years old, shows a young, charismatic, and confident gentleman dressed according to the tastes of the epoch, which was also termed the “Belle Époque” in Switzerland. The painting, with his tie, collar, and well-groomed mustache, a cigarillo in his mouth, and a hat befitting his social status, is a stunningly realistic representation of the artist.

Today, more than 60 of his portraits defined by human intimacy and a familial atmosphere have been preserved, showing him from the age of a small child to an old man. Further, he portrays old women, including his mother, with genuine compassion and affection. He does not gloss over features, nor does he attempt to erase the traces and scars of time, yet always preserves their dignity. In my eyes, absolutely superb is the picture of his geriatric father, as well as the portraits of his long-time friend and patron Xaver Thürig, the mayor of his birthplace, Malters, and the teacher Jakob Bächler. Another masterpiece, evoking memories of Rembrandt's city councilmen depictions, painted in 1927, shows the artist in his role as director of construction, together with nine members of the Biel municipal council. The gentlemen appear to be in a pensive mood, lost in their thoughts, poignantly reflecting their authority and sense of political responsibility for their town even during a session break; it shows Swiss democracy as it lives and breathes at a time when voting rights for women were still a distant future. All the human images of Voegtli have extremely distinct individual characteristics and features. They are unique. The highlights of his late work, which were painted under the duress of his serious health issues, are four portraits of the so-called Spahi. These were soldiers from the French colonies of Africa who were prisoners of war after the Nazi occupation of France (Some of them managed to escape to western Switzerland).

They were granted asylum and interned in an area around Biel; however, they were able to work on the agricultural operations in the vicinity. Voegtli gives the African war refugees strong, expressive faces and imparts them red coat, dignity, pride, and determination. They were to be his last paintings.

It is a stroke of fortune for Switzerland and for collectors around the globe that a landscape and portrait painter of international standards and epoch-spanning importance has been rediscovered and, thanks to the efforts of the Pashmin Art Gallery, been made accessible to the global art market.

58 Spahi with a Horse
Aquarelle on paper / 36 x 46 cm / Early 20th Cent.





