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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

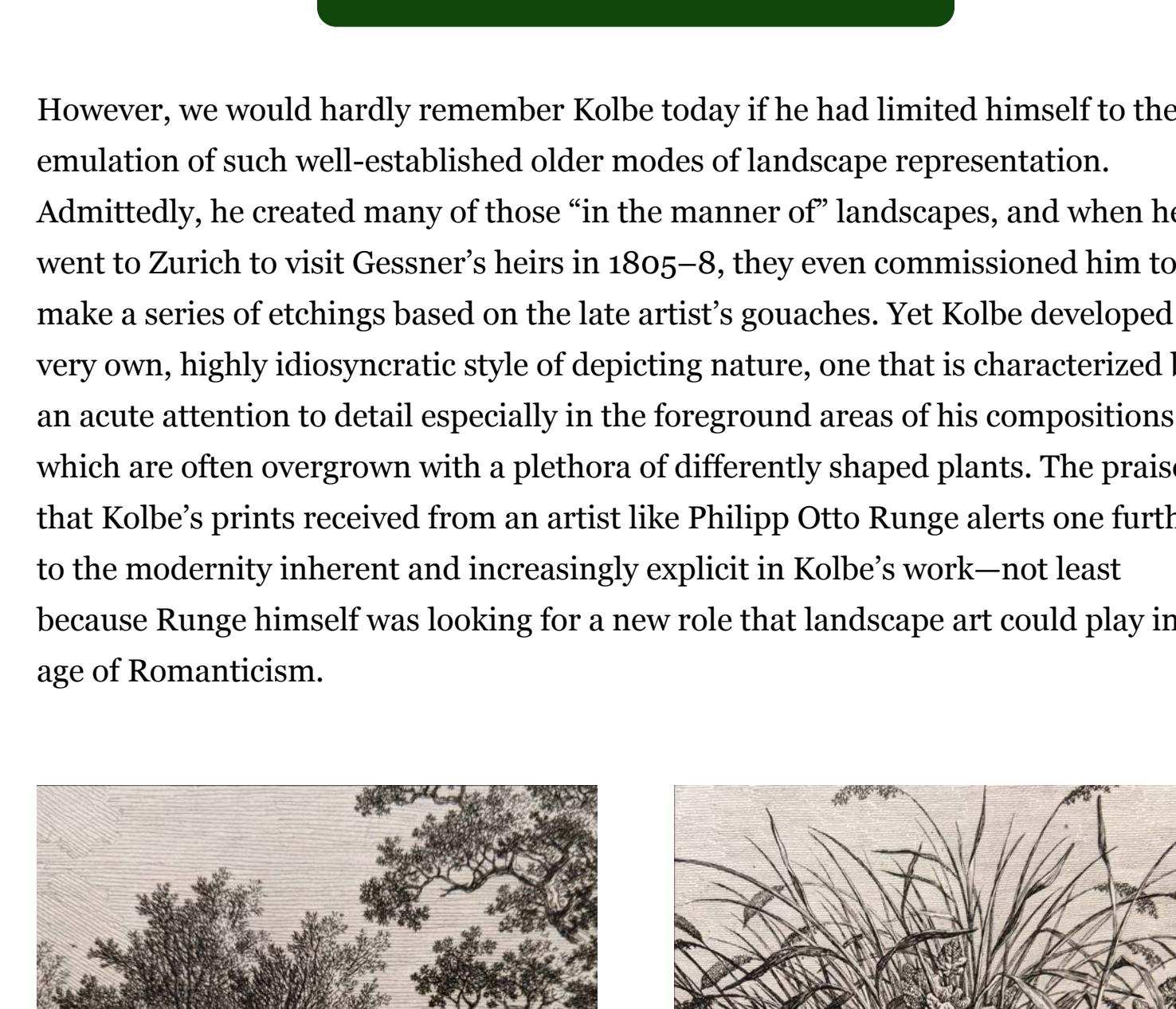
Distraction / Abwechslung

20 October 2020

One of the crucial steps in the development of the Romantic landscape in late eighteenth-century Germany was the discovery of a nature that was no longer mediated through the art of previous centuries. Until then, landscape was taught at art schools and academies by copying the Dutch landscapists of the seventeenth century (e.g., Antonie Waterloo or Jacob van Ruisdael) or the so-called heroic landscapes of Nicolas Poussin or Claude Lorrain—all of them widely available through reproductive as well as translational prints.

Earlom (after Claude), Liber Veritatis (ex coll. Speck von Sternburg)

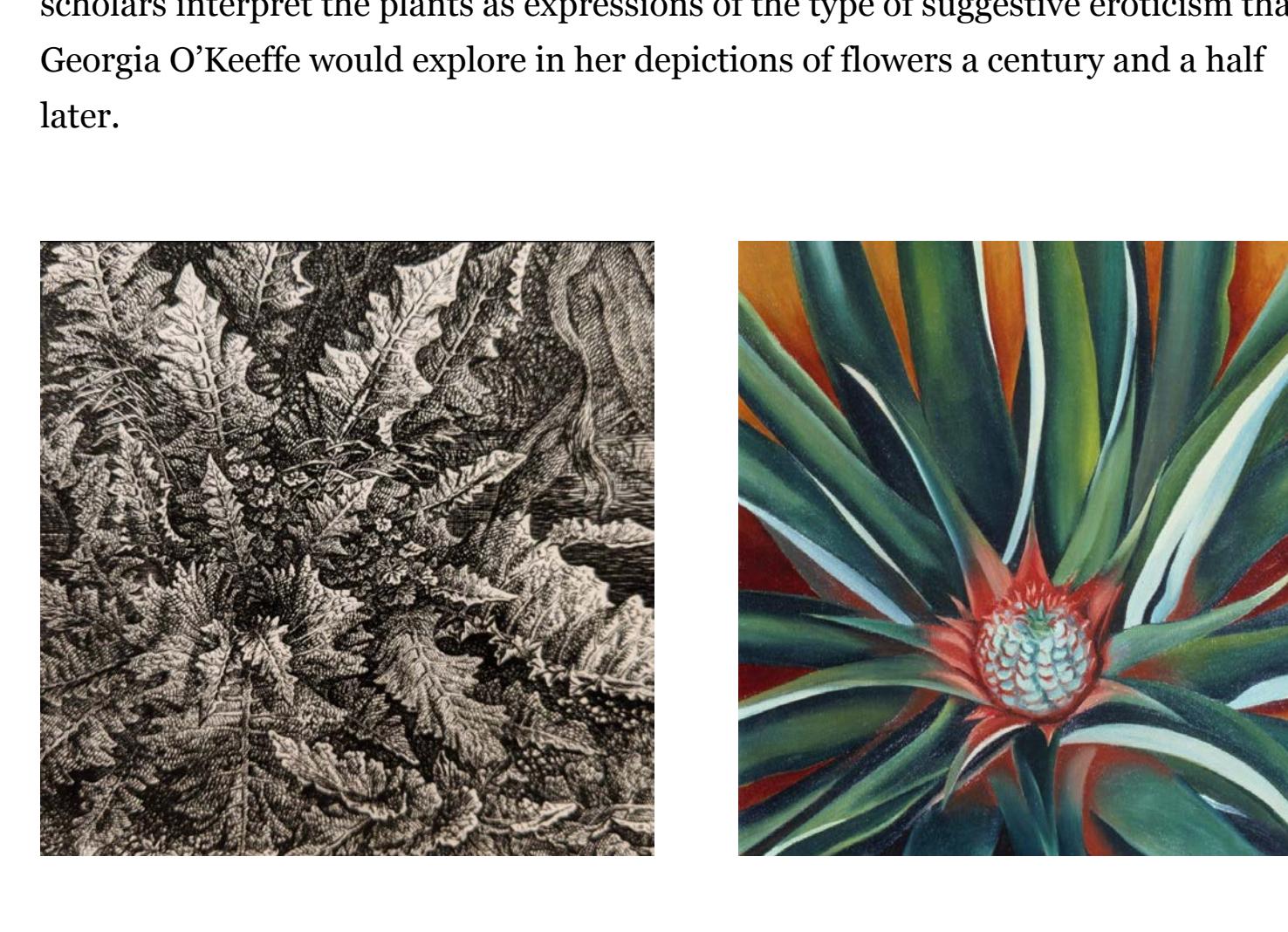
In Dresden, the Swiss-born Adrian Zingg, while teaching printmaking at the newly founded academy, was among the first to venture a few miles up the River Elbe into the Elbsandsteingebirge to draw the spectacular rock formations of the Sächsische Schweiz (Saxon Switzerland), paving the way for others to follow. Further down the river, in Dessau, along the floodplains formed where the smaller Mulde River flows into the Elbe, worked another artist who was arguably of equal importance for overcoming the schemes and formulas of traditional landscape art: Carl Wilhelm Kolbe (1759–1835).



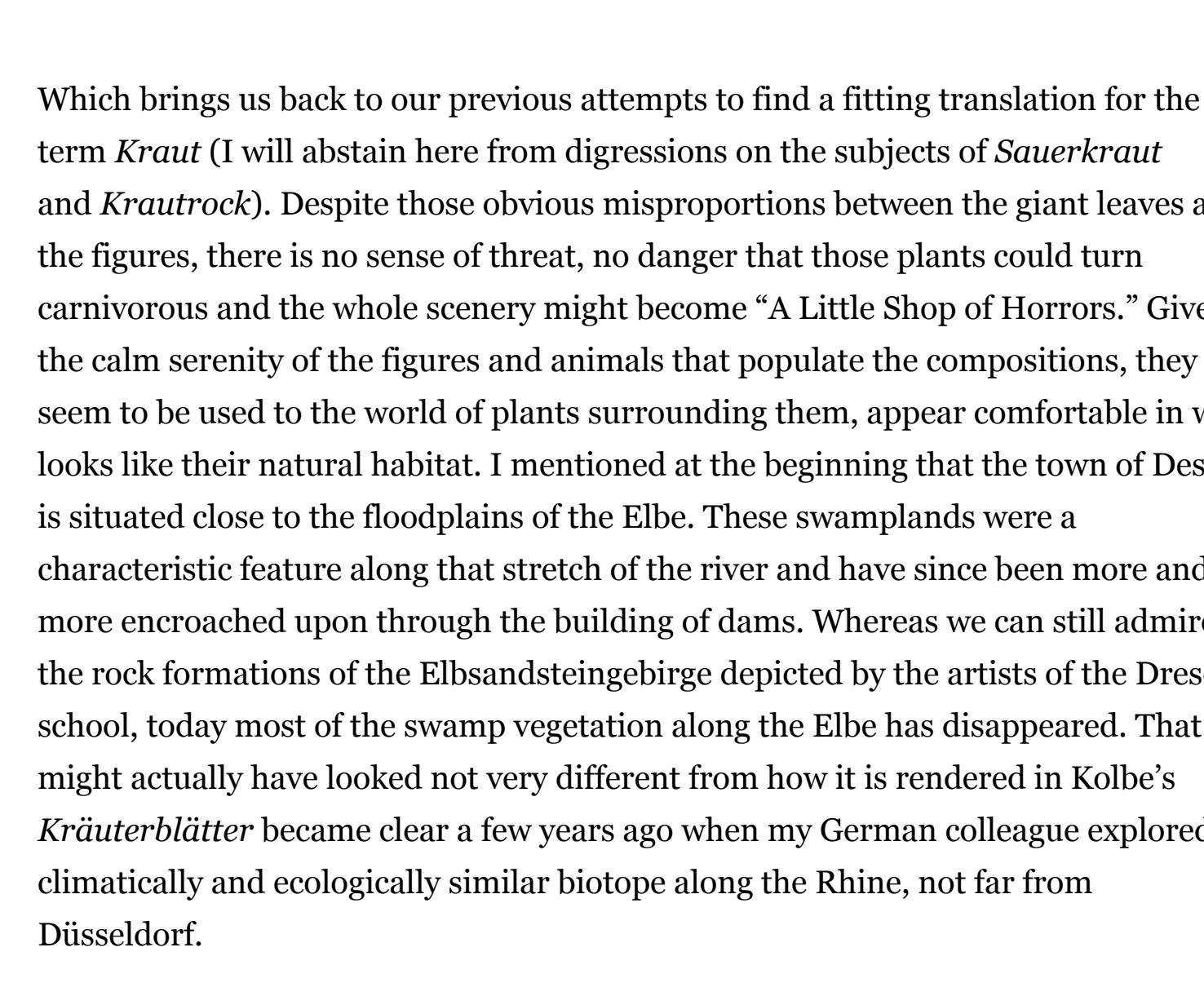
Kolbe worked exclusively as a graphic artist, creating drawings and over 300 etchings that were published in installments starting in 1796. A talented amateur draftsman, he was already 30 years old when he turned artmaking into a profession and enrolled at the Berlin Academy, encouraged by his uncle, the prolific Berlin printmaker Daniel Chodowiecki. In his autobiography, Kolbe mentions Waterloo and Ruisdael as his models, as well as the Arcadian idylls of the Swiss artist and writer Salomon Gessner. Measuring himself against those virtual mentors, he once proudly wrote in a letter to a fellow artist in 1798 about some of his new etchings: “Regarding the execution of these prints, I dare to look Waterloo and Gessner squarely in the eye.”

a selection of drawings by Kolbe

However, we would hardly remember Kolbe today if he had limited himself to the emulation of such well-established older modes of landscape representation. Admittedly, he created many of those “in the manner of” landscapes, and when he went to Zurich to visit Gessner’s heirs in 1805–8, they even commissioned him to make a series of etchings based on the late artist’s gouaches. Yet Kolbe developed his very own, highly idiosyncratic style of depicting nature, one that is characterized by an acute attention to detail especially in the foreground areas of his compositions which are often overgrown with a plethora of differently shaped plants. The praise that Kolbe’s prints received from an artist like Philipp Otto Runge alerts one further to the modernity inherent and increasingly explicit in Kolbe’s work—not least because Runge himself was looking for a new role that landscape art could play in the age of Romanticism.



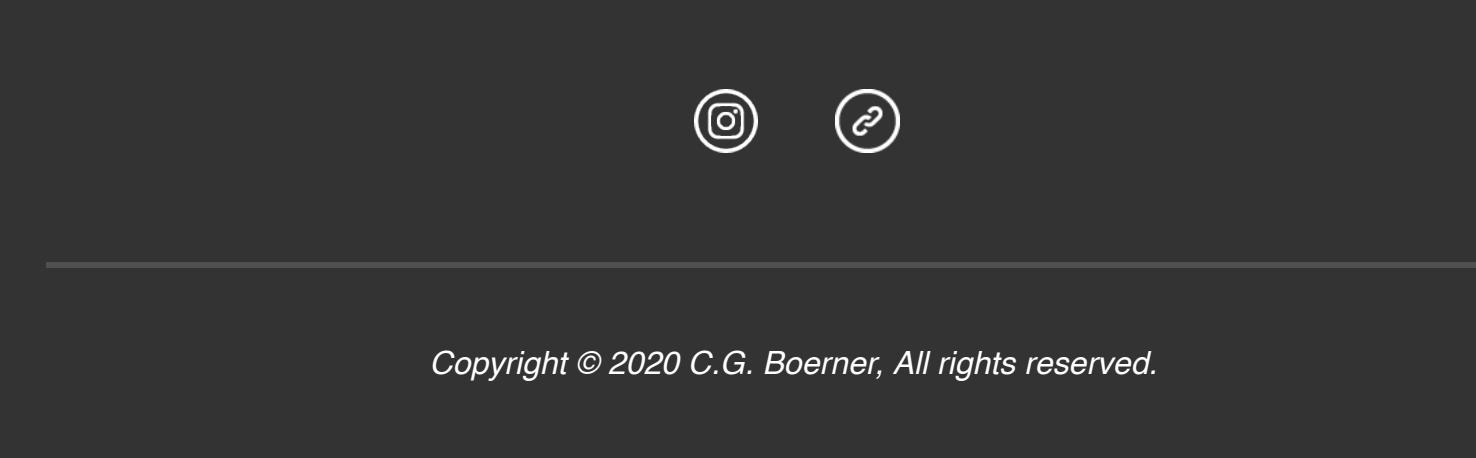
Kolbe’s close-up studies of plants have often been described as “hypertrophic.” Their seemingly disproportionate presence next to the stock figures of the Arcadian idyll (youths, maidens, shepherds, shepherdesses, fauns, satyrs, nymphs, as well as sheep, goats, cows, and a flute-playing Pan for good measure) make them look like plants on steroids. Most notable among these prints are his rightly famous *Kräuterblätter* in which the plants form no longer merely a part of the landscape but have become the sole subject of the composition. The term *Kräuterblatt* is not easy to translate since “Kraut,” in German, means “herb,” but “herbal sheets” is not what these compositions are, and the commonly used term “vegetable prints” does not ring quite true either since the compositions are hardly reminders of what to eat to stay healthy. It is perhaps more helpful to think about the somewhat colloquial German phrase *ins Kraut schießen*, which means “to get out of control” or “to go wild.” This gives probably a more correct connotation for what those *Kräuterblätter* represent, and it is in this sense that they invite a wide range of art-historical interpretations.



The extreme, if not surreal, proportional relationship between the plants and the staffage figures are seen as alluding to the theory of the sublime, since *das Erhabene muss gross seyn* (the sublime has to be large). With reference to some of the frolicking figures that can be made out in the under-, or rather, overgrowth, some scholars interpret the plants as expressions of the type of suggestive eroticism that Georgia O’Keeffe would explore in her depictions of flowers a century and a half later.



Along this train of thought, the plants become symbols of sensitive perception. The fact that Kolbe remained a bachelor throughout his life allowed not just the plants but also the interpretations to go wild. “His relationship to love was trapped in a tug-and-pull of opposing forces: bachelorhood, denial of love, and self-contempt on one side, rapture, longing for love, and a swollen sensual vein on the other” (Agnes Thum).



Which brings us back to our previous attempts to find a fitting translation for the term *Kraut* (I will abstain here from digressions on the subjects of *Sauerkraut* and *Krautrock*). Despite those obvious misproportions between the giant leaves and the figures, there is no sense of threat, no danger that those plants could turn carnivorous and the whole scenery might become “A Little Shop of Horrors.” Given the calm serenity of the figures and animals that populate the compositions, they all seem to be used to the world of plants surrounding them, appear comfortable in what looks like their natural habitat. I mentioned at the beginning that the town of Dessau is situated close to the floodplains of the Elbe. These swamplands were a characteristic feature along that stretch of the river and have since been more and more encroached upon through the building of dams. Whereas we can still admire the rock formations of the Elbsandsteingebirge depicted by the artists of the Dresden school, today most of the swamp vegetation along the Elbe has disappeared. That it might actually have looked not very different from how it is rendered in Kolbe’s *Kräuterblätter* became clear a few years ago when my German colleague explored a climatically and ecologically similar biotope along the Rhine, not far from Düsseldorf.

Realizing that those gigantic leaves do actually exist, even within the temperate climate zone of *Mittel-Europa*, is also a warning. However tempting it might be to unpack Kolbe’s highly idiosyncratic vision of Arcadia, we should nonetheless be careful not to project too much of iconology’s hidden symbolism onto those bug-eaten cabbage leaves.

a selection of prints by Kolbe

