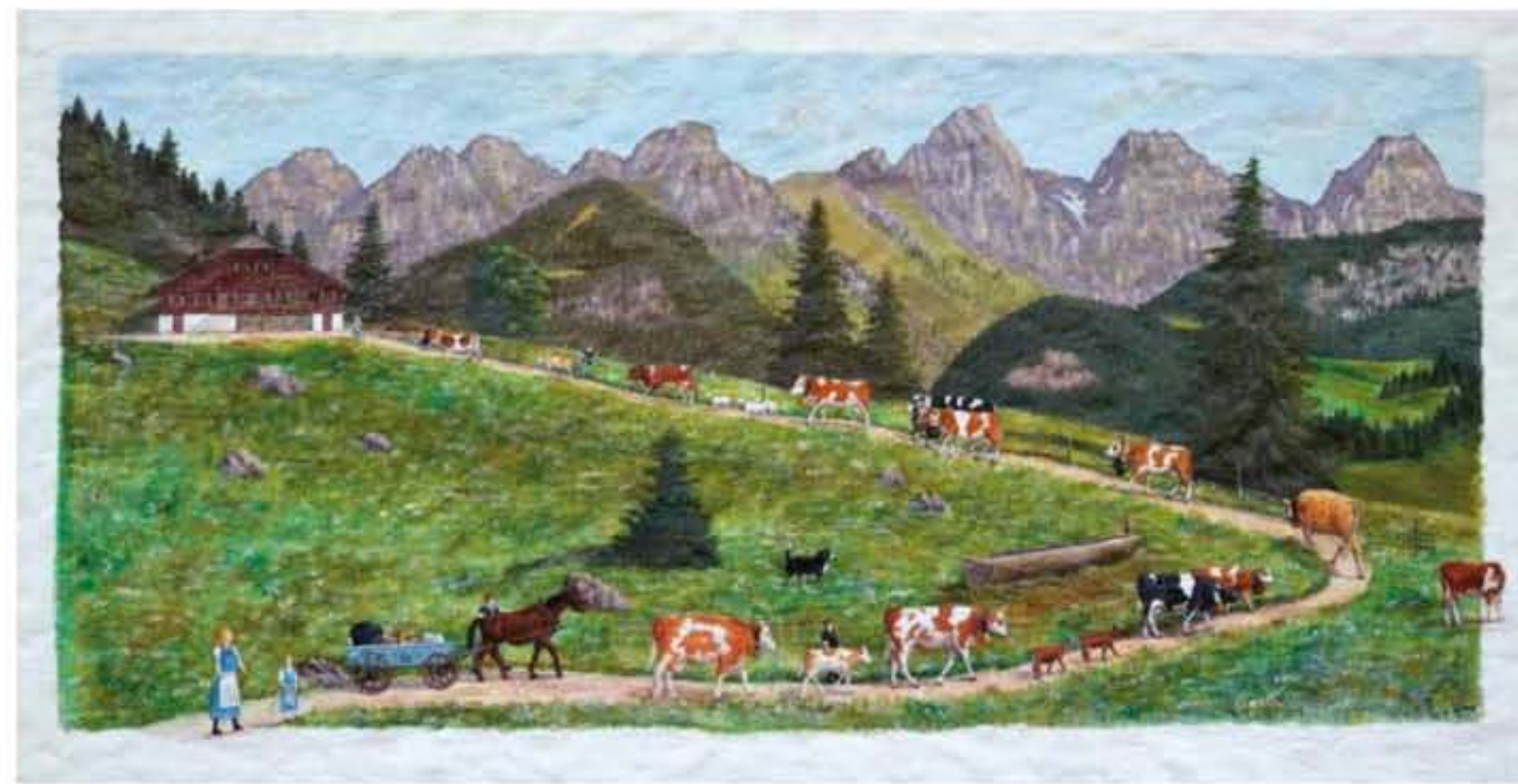


"Painting 20 cows, that means 80 legs and 40 horns — I definitely don't have the patience for that."

THE PAINTER WHO MOVES MOUNTAINS

IN the Appenzell they have Sennenstreifen, in Fribourg they have poyas. Painted onto wooden boards, these artworks depict the annual ritual of driving the cattle up to their alpine summer pastures. Poyas first emerged around Gruyère about 200 years ago and are enjoying increased popularity. One of the best known representatives of this naïve art is Willy Läng. We visited him at home, just a stone's throw from Gstaad.

"Isn't this wonderful?" Willy Läng is sitting on the terrace of his chalet in Château-d'Oex, indicating the view he enjoys every day. In the secluded garden, a pair of magpies are preening their feathers by the pond, the neighbouring wood chalets set a cosy scene and in the background the Gummfluh mountain soars above the Vaudois foothills. "I have painted our local mountain in all conditions imaginable — shrouded in fog, blanketed in snow and bathed in the light of the setting sun", he says with a hearty laugh.



On the table in front of him lies a wooden board, roughly cut to size. The top third is covered by a pale blue background, with small white clouds encircling the mountain peaks. The rest is still bare. Läng dips the brush into a blob of paint and with a few assured strokes applies a dense green band to the row of hills in front of the imposing mountain range. Green peaks jut out here and there, but as yet none of it resembles a forest of firs. For this, Willy Läng first has to mix up two or three other shades of green. His brush darts between pallet and painting. Pale green, blue-green and yellow-green are applied in deep concentration. Carefully his practised hand brings the individual fir trees to life. By and by, a deceptively realistic forest emerges from the dark green background.

He is a painter who has been known to move mountains. The 73 year-old self-taught artist is best known for his poyas, which he always creates in the same order — sky, mountains, hills, forest, grass, chalets. “Poya” is the traditional Fribourg patois term for the annual cattle drive up to the alpine pastures. Today, however, the term is mainly used with reference to the painterly depiction of this important event in the Swiss farming year. For centuries, the herdsmen have driven their

cattle up to the lush alpine meadows each May, to spend the summer there. Nearly 200 years ago, it became custom to visually record the event, most often on a simple wooden board. The poyas became the 19th century equivalent of the selfie. Clad in traditional dress, the herdsmen and their animals were depicted looking their best. Once finished, the poya was proudly hung above the barn entrance — prominently positioned for everyone to see.

It was over 25 years ago that Willy Läng placed an advert in the papers: “Will paint your chalet for 200 francs”. He has painted thousands of pictures since then, he proudly tells me. Over time, the chalets were joined by farm animals and scenes of rural life, painted onto wooden slats, old wardrobe doors, simple boards, as well as bells and milk churns. He only paints to order though. “I just don’t have the space to store pictures until they are sold”, he simply states. Poyas use the charm of naïve painting, but are also intended to be realistic representations. To this end, he makes use of reference material such as private photos provided by customers. That doesn’t mean he hasn’t sometimes been asked to plant an entirely different mountain chain behind the chalet in question. Willy Läng laughs. “No problem.

Humour is important to me. After all, I sometimes like to add amusing details myself here and there.” That is all he will say about it. If you look closely, you’ll spot them soon enough, he says. The landscape is the stage set of the poyas — and it is also his favourite motif. He can’t get enough of mountains, forests and chalets. This is all very well, but what about the herd of cows, the herdsmen in their Sunday best, the dog, the cart and the goats that make the poya what it is? “Painting 20 cows, that means 80 legs and 40 horns — I definitely don’t have the patience for that.” The “personnel” of the cattle drive ritual is the domain of Arianne Freudiger, a former neighbour: “When I work on a poya, I completely immerse myself in the story of the picture.” Ever since they first met in the 1990’s, the two amateur painters have shared the work and earnings of the ten to twelve poyas they produce a year. The commissions mainly come from the mountain regions in nearby France and in Switzerland. Although the number of farmers and alp owners is declining, the interest in this art form has steadily grown over the past few years. The poyas are finding new admirers and serve as traditional ornaments in the decoration of holiday chalets. (rea)

— POYAWILLY.CH

The most beautiful poyas by Willy Läng and much more can be found in the illustrated book “Schweizer Handwerkskunst – Werkstattportraits”, Orell Füssli 2016, ISBN 978-3-280-05627-1