



H.C. & CULTURE

Evening at Café Bauer – Berlin

Lesser Ury, Painter

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Cafés, like other catering establishments, were the second home for many Impressionist artists. People came there not only to satisfy the need for socialization by conducting disputes about painting or art in general with a glass of something hard, but also in search of inspiration. Where else can a whole life drama unfold before our very eyes, if not in a drinking establishment?

It is no wonder that almost all Impressionists, large and small, in their portfolios, certainly have at least one or two paintings depicting scenes from the lives of visitors and employees of bars, taverns, coffee houses, restaurants and simpler eateries.

Electrification to all cafés now!

Lesser Ury was no exception. He was a frequent visitor to the Berlin café Bauer, which

located at Unter-den-Linden Boulevard 26. The establishment was opened in 1877 by a Viennese restaurateur Mathias Bauer. His previous venture, the lobby bar of the Kaiserhof hotel, fell victim to a fire. So he used the money paid by insurance to organize a new restaurant in a luxurious belle époque style.

The Café Bauer was a progressive place. In addition to a billiard room and a reading room, a ladies' room was provided in it — an exceptional rarity at that time. This innovation has opened the entrance to the fair sex, the representatives of which had never been expected to visit such places before. Previously, coffee shops were an exclusively male kingdom, where women were only among service personnel, who were often subjected to indecent looks, gestures and suggestions. But since then, the atmosphere in the capital's restaurants has become more democratic.



Photo: wikimedia.org

This was far from the only thing that distinguished the Café Bauer from others. The owner spent 30 thousand marks annually on fresh press from different European countries for his visitors, which is equivalent to about 200 thousand euros today. Perhaps this is nothing more than a beautiful legend, but it was while reading the newspapers that Lesser often caught up with his models (1, 2, 3).

And that was not all. In 1884, Bauer's café was the first to introduce electric lighting. Needless to say, how much this contributed both to getting acquainted with the international press and working on pictorial sketches, in comparison with the meager opportunities that gas lamps or even candles gave.

The Drama Queen

Lesser Ury dedicated several canvases to his favourite pastime place. The Evening at Café Bauer is perhaps the most inspired of them all. Along with the others, it is distinguished by compositional sophistication, a special atmosphere of comfort, and a dramatic subject.

The man in the foreground is completely immersed in reading a newspaper, so he completely does not notice the lady at the next table, who is clearly preoccupied with something extremely important to her. This can be seen both in her tense gaze and in the position of her tightly clasped hands.

What is she thinking of? Perhaps her gaze is fixed on the front door of the café hoping that her late friend is about to appear. Or she does not wait for anyone at all, but slowly falls into despair from her prolonged loneliness. Or maybe she hopes that the gentleman in the top hat and glasses would finally take his eyes off his newspaper and pay some attention to her. This scene has something in common with Lesser's painting that he had executed the same year. But that one looks more like a sketch, a search for a compositional solution to this canvas.

Alas and alack

We do not know about the fate of the lonely young lady, but we know precisely about the further fate of the cafeteria that was immortalized in Lesser Ury's paintings. After the death of the restaurateur, the business was continued by his widow Therese with the support of her sons Josef and Oskar. In 1910, the premises of the Bauer café were bought by the owner of a large hotel business (by the way, it still exists).

But it was not the end of the history of the famous café. By that time, the Bauers' business had grown in earnest, becoming a joint stock limited liability company (GmbH). The new incarnation of the legendary café has found its place opposite the

Bahnhof Friedrichstraße, in the impressive Central-Hotel complex.

Unfortunately, during the Second World War, both the hotel and the former building on Unter-den-Linden Boulevard were destroyed to the ground. Nowadays, the prestigious Lindencorso business centre, which was erected in 1964, stands on the original site of Lesser Ury's favourite haven. And in memory of the cult institution, Bauer's descendants were left with only a few paintings by its eminent regular.



Author: Natalia Azarenko – arhive.com

The painter