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Wolf, Caspar, *Der Untere Grindelwaldgletscher mit Lütschine und dem Mettenberg*, 1774, Öl auf Leinwand, 53,5 x 81 cm (Objektmaß), Kunst Museum Winterthur. Reinhart am Stadtgarten, 478

Documentation level



Name

Wolf, Caspar

Other version/s of name

Wolff, Caspar

Dates of birth and death

* 3.5.1735 Muri (Taufe), † 6.10.1783 Heidelberg

Municipality of origin (CH)

Muri [AG]

Nationality

CH

Brief biography

Landschafts- und Dekorationsmaler. Pionier der Alpendarstellung. Vorlagen für die Stichfolge *Merkwürdige Prospekte aus den Schweizer-Gebürgen und derselben Beschreibung* (1777)

Fields of activity

Ölmalerei, Gouache, Zeichnung, Radierung, Kupferstich, Aquatinta

Lexicon article

Caspar Wolf grew up in poverty as the fourth of seven children of the carpenter and wood carver Joseph Wolf and Sibylle Veronika Süess, a farmer's daughter. In 1749, possibly on the recommendation of the Prince Abbot of Muri, Wolf was apprenticed to Johann Jakob Anton von Lenz, painter at the episcopal court. From 1753, he was a journeyman, initially in Augsburg. Stylistic features in Wolf's work of this period suggest that he collaborated with the *vedute* and prospect painter [Jakob Christoph Weyermann](#) of St. Gallen, at least for the second half of his time in Augsburg. Johann Elias Ridinger (1698–1767) is believed to

be a second point of reference. Presumably around 1757, Wolf travelled to Munich, where in artistic terms he was probably interested in the room decorations of Joachim Franz Beich (1665–1748) and the works of Philipp Hieronymus Brinckmann, Court Painter to the Elector Palatine. Wolf may also have seen Dutch and Flemish paintings in the Elector Palatine's gallery at Schloss Schleissheim. Due to a lack of documentary evidence, very little can be said with any certainty about a possible sojourn in Passau.

After eleven years of travelling through southern Germany, tangible evidence of Wolf's renewed presence in his homeland is provided by the altarpiece painted for the Tell Chapel in Küsnacht, which is signed, dated and marked with the place name Muri. Until 1768, Wolf executed various works as a painter of stoves, wallpapers and altar frontals; his wallpaper paintings for two rooms in the Prince Abbot's summer residence in Horben (1762–63) have been preserved intact. In 1763, Wolf married Johanna Baptista Catharina Kächler of Muri. Due to a lack of decorative commissions, Wolf produced increasing numbers of studies for landscapes. After a sojourn of no more than one year in Basel, by 1769 he was in Paris, where he found employment at the workshop of the illustrious landscape painter, [Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg](#) (1740–1812). In the autumn of 1771, Wolf returned to Muri, where he produced idealised landscapes, hunting scenes and seascapes.

In 1773, he made the acquaintance of the Bernese book-printer and publisher Abraham Wagner (1734–1782), who belonged to the circle of the naturalist and Alpine poet, Albrecht von Haller (1708–1777), and as a client was to become a key figure for Wolf. In 1774, Wolf settled in Berne. Partly with Wagner and partly with the pastor and naturalist Jakob Samuel Wytenbach (1748–1838), the artist undertook various study trips to Central Switzerland, the Gotthard, the Engelberg region, the Bernese Oberland and the Valais. By 1778, he had created approximately 170 oil paintings, which served as engraver's models and of which Wagner presented about 150 to the public in a non-selling exhibition at his gallery in Berne. Wolf was entitled to produce replicas to order. Wagner's principal aim was to publish a series of coloured outline engravings: 1777, first edition of *Merkwürdige Prospekte aus den Schweizer-Gebürgen und derselben Beschreibung* (Remarkable Views of the Swiss Mountains with Descriptions), with a *Foreword* by Albrecht von Haller. This was followed in 1778 by the French edition entitled *Vues Remarquables des Montagnes de la Suisse avec leur Description. Alpes Helveticæ* – in a smaller format and executed in the traditional copperplate engraving technique – had already been published in 1777.

Presumably in connection with a commission, in 1777 Wolf moved to Solothurn, where he also worked on templates for a

series of *Swiss Costumes* and from where he went on painting trips to French-speaking Switzerland, probably at his own expense. In 1779, second sojourn in Paris, with the aim of exhibiting the pictures and republishing the *Vues Remarquables* as four-coloured aquatint prints. However, the popular success Wolf had expected failed to materialise, and two years later, due to Wagner's untimely death, he was also temporarily forced to stop working on the aquatints. In 1780, he travelled to Aachen, where he produced views of Rhenish castles, manor houses and parks. In 1782, he was in Paris for the last time in order to promote the edition, but did not live to see it published: he died of kidney disease in Heidelberg, probably while returning to Switzerland. In 1785, together with the already completed printing plates and paintings, the publication rights passed to publisher [Rudolph Samuel Henzi](#) (1731–1803), who published the edition that same year (43 folio sheets). However, some of the plates are a far cry from Wolf's originals.

Caspar Wolf is now considered one of the pioneers of Alpine painting. He penetrated the mountain world, long perceived as sinister and threatening, much more deeply than other protagonists in this genre, early representatives of which include [Jan Janszoon Hackaert](#), [Conrad Meyer](#) and [Felix Meyer](#), as well as Wolf's contemporary [Johann Ludwig Aberli](#). Despite several editions of engravings and various decorative commissions, Wolf was not particularly successful in his own lifetime; he is to a large extent “a discovery of the 20th century” (Yvonne Boerlin-Brodbeck).

His early work is influenced by the southern German rococo style. Wolf's early landscape studies, produced besides his work as a decorative painter, lie somewhere between *vedute* and idealised landscapes, as exemplified by *Blick über das Reusstal* (View of the Reuss Valley, 1769). Only in the Abbot's Room in Horben can the beginnings of a more personal and more naturalistic landscape style be discerned. Some pictures connected with Wolf's first sojourn in Paris, on the other hand, are more fashionable, such as the *Sturm in einem Meerhafen* (Storm in a Seaport, 1772), which recalls the work of Claude Joseph Vernet (1714–1789).

Wolf's principal works were created between 1774 and 1778 under the influence of the enlightened researchers in Haller's circle, who occupied themselves with matters of Alpine geology and geomorphology. On at times audacious hiking tours, the artist sharpened his eye for the tectonics of the Alps, with their glaciers, torrents and screes marked by erosion. In front of the motif, he produced topographically precise studies in liquid, frost-resistant oil paints on cardboard. These were supplemented by drawings and gouaches. Once back in Berne, he would produce the paintings in his studio, and then take them back into the mountains in order to review and correct them on site.

Wolf paid particular attention to the shapes of rocks (crags, jagged lines, caves) and water in its various aggregate states (glacier ice, waterfalls, mountain lakes and water mist with rainbows). Tiny staffage figures – among which the artist can frequently be recognised – bring home the huge dimensions of the mountains and glaciers. Wolf's paintings employ a restrained palette of subtly graduated shades of brown, grey, green and blue. In his later work, he does not fall prey to the cult of the sublime typical of the period, despite the sometimes daunting emptiness of his pictorial spaces (*Blick*

von der Bänisegg über den Unteren Grindelwaldgletscher und das Fiescherhornmassiv, View from the Bänisegg over the Lower Grindelwald Glacier and the Fiescherhorn Massif, 1776–77, Winterthur, Museum Oskar Reinhart am Stadtgarten). The playful ornamentation of the rococo is now also absent. Only the preference for certain motifs, such as curved cave entrances (*Drachenhöhle bei Stans*, Dragon's Cave near Stans, Aargauer Kunsthhaus Aarau) or transverse oval forms (*Der Geltenschuss im Lauenental mit Schneebrücke*, The Geltenschuss in the Lauenen Valley with a Snow Bridge, Winterthur, Museum Oskar Reinhart am Stadtgarten), can be understood as reminiscences of the southern German rocaille style. In anticipation of the Romantic movement, Caspar Wolf achieved a realism whose drama is based on the overwhelming impact of his subject matter.

Works: Aargauer Kunsthhaus Aarau; Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum und Kupferstichkabinett; Muri, Murianer Museen, Caspar Wolf Kabinett; Kunstmuseum Solothurn; Winterthur, Museum Oskar Reinhart am Stadtgarten.

Sandi Paucic 1998, updated 2011
Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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Website

<https://www.murikultur.ch/museum-caspar-wolf>

Direct link

<http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4022852&lng=en>

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