

**Zeitschrift:** The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK  
**Herausgeber:** Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom  
**Band:** - (1973)  
**Heft:** 1660

**Artikel:** The life and work of Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918)  
**Autor:** [s.n.]  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689004>

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# The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER

The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

Vol. 59 No. 1660

FRIDAY, 11th MAY, 1973

## THE LIFE AND WORK OF FERDINAND HODLER (1853–1918)



"Der Holzfäller"  
Bern Arts Museum

Ferdinand Hodler was born in the same year as the Dutch painter van Gogh. He was ten years older than the Norwegian Edvard Munch. All three painters were uncompromising individualists. They may have been influential during their lifetime but none of them founded a school or joined his contemporaries in any form of movement like the previous generation of Impressionists or the later Nabis and Fauves. Although all three had very different personalities and their works are unmistakably their own, we can establish certain affinities, partly because they were contemporaries but more through common experiences and characteristics.

Like van Gogh, Hodler was strongly attracted to religion. Van Gogh started work with an art dealer, then threw himself into Bible studies and worked as a missionary in the Borinage until he was dismissed for taking the Gospels too literally. At the age of twenty-seven he became aware of his vocation as a painter. He saw his art as the continuation of his previous activities.

When he was about twenty-seven, Hodler went through a religious crisis. He too wished to become a pastor. In the summer of 1880 he attended the

meetings in Langenthal of a religious sect ("Stundeler"). These encounters are reflected in paintings such as "Prayer meeting in the Canton of Bern" (Kunstmuseum Bern) and "At prayer". He also painted an increasing number of portraits of old men and women – contemplative old men, artisans and vintagers. In the early 1890s Hodler went to Paris where he came under the influence of the Rosicrucians who invited him to exhibit in the Salon de la Rose-Croix. Hodler accepted, showed "The disappointed souls" in 1892 and became a member of the Rosicrucian artist's group, the Rose-Croix Esthétique.

In their early works, both Hodler and van Gogh use a similar palette. Brown in all its gradations dominates, and most of the figurative work is marked by a heavy earthy tone. Paris, and especially the Mediterranean, opened van Gogh's eyes to the effect of pure colour. Hodler's palette did not lighten until the 1890s and only achieved its full luminosity after the turn of the century.

Another similarity between Hodler and van Gogh is the important place self-portraits take up in their work. Van Gogh painted at least thirty self-portraits,

Hodler a few more. For both, one reason may have been the fact that they were their own cheapest model. What seems more important however, is the painter's constant urge to confront himself, to examine himself afresh, even to surprise himself, in order to discover what lies beneath the surface. For Hodler, especially in his youth, portrayed himself in the most varied dress and moods – laughing, grinning, angry, at work, solemn, proud, self-assured and self-satisfied, and at the end filled with foreboding of death.

Hodler also has something in common with Munch, who was ten years younger. The link here lies less in certain personality traits than in the bitter experiences of both painters in their youth. Munch's early work is marked by the experience of death. He lost his mother when he was five, his sister in 1877, his father in 1889. The Damocles sword of illness hovered over Munch as a constant threat.

### THE SPIRIT OF DEATH

Hodler lost both parents and all five sisters and brothers from tuberculosis between 1859 and 1885. He and Albertine, the daughter of his sister Marie Elise, were the only survivors in the family. His own son, Hector, was to die of the same disease in 1920. So Hodler's youth was overshadowed by death to an unusual degree and as a result he always felt threatened. This influenced his painting. It emerges very clearly in his large figurative compositions of the 1890s and is most striking in "Night", dated 1890. "Night" shows a sleeping group and a powerful man – the thirty-seven year-old painter himself – shocked from sleep by a nightmare or the spirit of death.

Hodler and Munch can also be compared in that the works of both can be clearly divided into two parts: the early work, with some of the characteristics already mentioned, contrasts with the later work marked by stronger colours and greater luminosity. The victory over the fear of death enabled both painters to

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Published Twice Monthly at  
63/67 TABERNACLE STREET  
LONDON E.C.2  
Tel: 01-253 2321  
Telegrams: Paperwyse London

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turn their attention to more active life. In Munch's work this is represented by his workmen and teams of horses, in that of Hodler by such works as "The woodcutter" or "The rising of the students of Jena". But this more masculine spirit also found pictorial expression in their portraits and landscapes.

## HODLER'S ALLEGORICAL STYLE

Before the First World War Hodler's figurative work was most admired. These paintings obviously suited the general mood of euphoria that was blind to the catastrophe to come. After the familiar world of yesterday had collapsed, Hodler's allegories necessarily lost credit too. But the true reason for their short life was above all the fact that allegories cannot be created out of nothing by an individual, and moreover one who stood on the borders of society. The precondition is always a community that seeks new allegories for itself. There was no such community either in Geneva or in any other part of Switzerland. And yet "Night" of 1890, is one of the great pictorial creations of the nineteenth century. "Night" is also the first realization of Hodler's concept of parallelism: the attempt to intensify the overall effect, above all to convey the sense of unity, by the repetition of motif. In "Night" he achieves this through the variation of the sleeping figures and the chequered distribution of light and shade.

If "Night" is the final expression of Hodler's suffering in his youth and his youth and his early years as a painter, "Day", apart from its more general allegorical meaning, marks the moment when Hodler managed to assert himself as an artist. The dawning day, conveyed in gesture by women kneeling on a flower-strewn mountain meadow above a sea of mist, is also a new day for Hodler, finally promising him freedom as a creative artist after decades of bitter poverty and often hostile rejection.

## CULT OF A HEROIC PAST

Even Hodler's early work shows the curious split between two divergent if not opposed styles of expression that seem almost irreconcilable: on the one hand the stress on feeling, contemplative figures, meditating men, girls with flowers; on the other, warriors and

popular figures of all kinds. Hodler portrayed one world, which we can describe as the emotive, feminine one in the large figurative compositions he invented himself and developed until the end of his life. The other world is that of the active, masculine, forceful historical paintings. Hodler did not paint these national subjects and scenes of war on his initiative. They were entries for competitions or direct commissions.

Hodler's interpretation of national history derived from the sense of tradition and the cult of a heroic past newly fostered by the historicism of the nineteenth century. Yet it must be remembered that the first great competition works referred in fact to military defeats of the old Swiss Confederation: the "Engagement at Fraubrunnen" and "The Engagement at Neuenegg" (1798) were intended for the Town Hall at Bern and the retreat from Marignano (1515) for the Swiss Landesmuseum in Zurich.

The style which Hodler developed for his mural paintings was to affect his other work and in particular to modify his attitude to landscape. Hodler painted large numbers of alpine scenes after the turn of the century and it is as though his murals enabled him to see alpine landscape in monumental terms as well, and to express it monumentally.

## FIRST AND FOREMOST, A FIGURATIVE PAINTER

It is characteristic of Hodler that the first works he created as an artist rather than as a painter of souvenirs were not landscapes but portraits, self-portraits and figure paintings. The early portraits and self-portraits also reveal that Hodler was first and foremost a figurative painter. They have an admirably severe structure and a clarity of expression unusual in a beginner.

Between 1886 and 1889 Hodler completed some thirty paintings, most fairly small, of his mistress Augustine Dupin and their son Hector. They range from simple genre paintings to intimate portraits of mother and child and more monumental conceptions.

Until the turn of the century Hodler repeatedly painted girls picking or holding flowers. Often the likeness is shrouded under a more generalized attitude whose symbolic character anticipates the great later compositions.

Hodler was receiving commissions for portraits as early as 1890. Naturally the most direct portraits are those he painted on his own initiative. Between 1911 and 1913 Hodler painted at least four portraits of his friend the writer Mathias Morhardt who also encouraged Puvis de Chavannes, Rodin and others. Between 1912 and 1915 Hodler painted a number of portraits of Madame Valentine Darel, whose suffering and death he recorded stage by stage, almost as in a diary, during his frequent visits to the Lausanne clinic. The depth of this experience led to less stylized compositions and an increasing freedom and directness of execution which also influenced his landscape painting of the same period.

## REGAL TRINITY OF THE EIGER, MONCH AND JUNGFRAU

After the turn of the century landscapes became of major importance beside his large-scale compositions. Hodler's extensive preoccupation with murals and their technique had brought about a fundamental change in his style. He forces the spectator even further into the distance now; this view from afar no longer requires clearly delineated forms or clearly demarcated and separated colour areas.

In his landscapes Hodler tried in another way to express the same themes as in his large figurative historical and allegorical works: unity and uniformity. But whereas his chief difficulty in the figurative works was the composition, this problem disappeared in landscape painting. It was restricted to the choice of motifs. So this choice was of major importance. Wherever he looked Hodler repeatedly discovered natural forms that complied with his desire for symmetry, repetition, uniformity and with his structural principle of parallelism.

In 1908 Hodler painted the first of his large alpine landscapes. The scene is no longer viewed from the valley as before, but from halfway up the mountainside, so that the foreground—as in "Moonlit night"—plays a secondary role beside the regal trinity of the Eiger, Monch and Jungfrau. Only a few years later, during a lengthy stay in Murren in 1911, Hodler painted the mountain peaks without foreground: the heavy form of the Breithorn and the majestic Monch. This intimate encounter with the mountains reached its culmination in 1911. The blue-brown colour that was characteristic of Hodler's later work was first used in his paintings of the alpine peaks.

## THE SUPREME PAINTER OF ALPINE LANDSCAPES

In 1912 Hodler stayed in Chesières in the Waadtland and painted the first large landscapes of Wallis; the incomparable view into the lower valley of the Rhone, the view of the Dent du Midi and the Grand Muveran. The forms now seem less clear-cut than before, the colour is applied more softly and the effect is more painterly.

Already suffering from his final

illness, Hodler spent August and September, 1917 in Caux near Montreux. The landscapes he painted there – “Mist rising over the mouth of the Rhone”, “Grammont in the morning sun” and the “Waadtl Alps from Rochers-de-Naye” – have been described as “planetary landscapes” (paysages planétaires). They are supreme examples of Hodler’s massive mountains and cosmic spaces, painted in bold colours in an intense, transparent light.

In his last works Hodler returns to the early paintings of lakes though now

the forms are simplified, specific details have been eliminated and he uses only the simplest colour tones to achieve directness of effect.

The landscapes are the most important part of Hodler’s extensive work. If Cezanne and van Gogh have given us a particular image of the landscape of southern Europe which borders on the Mediterranean and Edvard Munch of the coastal landscape of the north, Hodler has contributed the definitive image of the Alps. No other painting of Alpine scenery is comparable.

*Guardian*, the Foreign Minister was discussing the Middle East in Geneva with the United Nations Secretary-General, Dr. Waldheim.”

But Mr. Graber’s statement after his meeting with Dr. Zayyat showed that no compromise over neutrality was in the offing. “I felt the need to explain to Dr. Zayyat the unvarying guidelines of our neutral policy, its imperatives and its limits. But, he added, everytime that new developments will give our overtures and will for cooperation an opportunity to come into play, this will be done . . . Egypt has her own views on the Middle East problem which we understand as the Egyptians understand our own convictions”.

Mr. Graber had spoken in this way several times before. He had said the same thing when he came to London in February of last year. Although, as the *Guardian* states, Switzerland is flexing its muscles in the diplomatic sphere, never has neutrality been more forcibly vindicated than today. Every official speech will stress the importance of cooperation and involvement in the world, provided the “imperatives” of neutrality can be met.

A need for change has gradually emerged and been recognized as the nations of the world grew closer together. Switzerland could not remain indifferent to the new relationships resulting from the United Nations, the EEC, the GATT and various international movements. Ever since Mr. Fritz Wahlen, former Foreign Minister, suggested the idea of

## COMMENT

### IS SWISS FOREIGN POLICY CHANGING?

Mr. Pierre Graber has returned from a journey to Egypt combining an official visit to that country and a special meeting – a kind of diplomatic première with the Swiss ambassadors to 13 countries of the Middle East and North Africa.

Our Foreign Minister was unexpectedly received by President Anouar Sadate before having talks with his Egyptian counterpart, Dr. Mohammed al Zayyat. The Egyptian Press interpreted this visit, and the Swiss presence at the preparatory talks for a European Security conference, as pointing to Berne’s more

positive attitude towards international problems. The paper “Al Ahrām” claimed that by this apparent shift in diplomatic stance, the Swiss Government was attempting to condition the Swiss public to the inevitability of Swiss entry into the United Nations.

The *Guardian*’s Berne correspondent commented that although the Egyptian newspaper was probably duty bound to arrive at such a conclusion, “the Swiss can hardly dispute the accuracy of the analysis. It comes at a time when the Swiss Government is flexing its supposedly neutral muscles in almost unprecedented fashion”.

To back his claim, the *Guardian*’s Rod Chapman said that Mr. Graber’s Egyptian visit was “by way of a diplomatic overture to the idea that Switzerland would not be averse to playing the role of mediator in the Middle East crisis”.

“Just a month ago, writes the

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