

Interview with the curator **Valentina Anker**

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## **“We must constantly keep in mind that symbolism was an international movement”**

Comprising some 200 masterpieces from Swiss and international museums, the exhibition **Myth and Mystery** provides a comprehensive view of Swiss symbolism and its interaction with European art between 1880 und 1910. The exhibition is a joint production with the Museo Cantonale d'Arte in Lugano and brings together works by artists such as Ferdinand Hodler, Arnold Böcklin, or Giovanni Segantini with paintings by Fernand Khnop, William Degouve de Nuncques, or Franz von Stuck. The show was curated by Genevan art historian Dr. Valentina Anker. In an interview she describes how the exhibition came about, what she regards as the specifically Swiss contribution to symbolism, and which paintings are her special favorites.

***Ms. Anker, as a specialist for Swiss symbolism, you published a book in 2009 on the subject that is a standard reference work. Why do you consider the Kunstmuseum Bern the appropriate location for finally giving symbolism the attention it deserves also in an exhibition?***

Already while I was working on my book I suggested an exhibition on the topic to a number of Swiss museums such as the Kunstmuseum Basel, which owns numerous eminent works by Arnold Böcklin, and likewise the Kunstmuseum Bern, which has at its disposal the most important works for symbolism that were painted by Ferdinand Hodler. The Kunstmuseum Bern agreed to my suggestion, and that is just wonderful because, until now, no exhibition on symbolism has had the good fortune of being able to show Hodler's large-format symbolist paintings *Disappointed Souls*, *Night*, *Day*, and *Eurythmie* simultaneously.

***In your book you grouped the artists according to the regions they came from, whereas the exhibition is organized according to subject matter. Why is this so?***

My book *Le symbolisme suisse: Destins croisés avec l'art européen* deals with Swiss artists in consideration of linguistic regions. My goal thereby was to reveal their affinities to the neighboring countries to which they felt connected because of language and the art academies they had studied at there, such as in Milan, Paris, or Munich. As far as the exhibition goes, it makes much more sense to structure it in regard to subject matter. This allows a different approach and lucidly illustrates the key subjects of Swiss symbolism in relation to the international movement.

***The title of your exhibition is “Myth and Mystery: Symbolism and Swiss Artists”. Can one really speak of “Swiss symbolism”? And if so, what are its specific qualities?***

Certainly one can speak of Swiss symbolism, just as one can of Belgian, French, or Italian symbolism. But we must constantly keep in mind that symbolism was an international movement. The specific qualities of Swiss symbolism would be, for example, an aptitude for introspection, such as we find among Swiss authors ranging from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Henri-Frédéric Amiel; or the knowledge of psychology of scholars such as Eugen Bleuler and Théodore Flournoy; not to forget a pronounced interest in interrelationships between music and the body, such as we find in Jaques-Dalcroze; or a spiritualized sense of nature and a penchant for the disparate and myth, as in Arnold Böcklin's case.

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***What do you see as the reason behind the current renewal of interest in symbolism as is reflected in the exhibitions in Bielefeld on German symbolism and in Vienna on Austrian symbolism?***

Symbolism was long neglected, probably because it is a difficult movement to understand and identify as such precisely, evading definitions. But new sensitivity toward and interest today in notions of cosmos and in reforming our way of life, combined with a liberal attitude toward spirituality and the emotions, confirm that symbolism is not only currently a highly relevant topic, but also has now made its impact on museums and in fact on the art market.

***Which works can be viewed as the highlights of the exhibition in your eyes?***

In answer to this question I will name three female figures. I am taken by the disquieting strangeness in Arnold Böcklin's painting *Calm at Sea*. The main subject is a siren, a mythological figure taken up by the symbolists again and again, and which interlinked femininity and demonic eroticism. Giovanni Segantini's painting *Vanity (The Source of Evil)* is equally phenomenal. Here too we find a reference to mythology, namely to the legend of Narcissus. Instead of the beautiful young woman finding her mirror image on the water's surface, however, she sees a monster. And finally I am greatly fascinated by Franz von Stuck's 1895 painting *The Kiss of the Sphinx* with its expressive articulation of violence and sensuality as well as the play of the colors vermilion and black. The work sets the Sphinx among the other femmes fatales who haunt symbolism and can be found in the exhibition in figures such as Salome.

*Interview: Magdalena Schindler*