

Preface from the catalogue

Matthias Frehner

Symbolism was not so much a style as an approach in which the artist was given the role of a priest at an oracle. This international movement, which emerged in around 1890, signalled a rejection of the profane reality that characterised the materialistic everyday life of mass society in an industrial age marked by technology, urbanisation and anonymity. The Symbolists penetrated beneath the cold surface of the rational world, behind which lay real life – that of the mysterious and the wonderful, as well as the uncanny and the sensual. Writers, composers and artists made it possible to experience all that was lost, secret, beautiful and true. Refugees from civilization and the present revived the mysteries of religions, mythologies and literature as syncretistic sites of desire. These spheres of the merely intuitable and imaginable generated poetry, painting and music that continued the Romantic and Impressionist dissolution of form through the suggestive evocation of moods. Claude Debussy, Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon all explored this avenue. However, there were also artists who ventured into the realm of the visionary by employing strategies from realism and the depth of field of photography. One example is Ferdinand Hodler's painting *Night* of 1889–90, which when first shown, in Geneva in February 1891, was deemed immoral and was removed from the Musée Rath just days before the exhibition's official opening. As Gustave Courbet and Édouard Manet had done previously in analogous situations, Hodler exhibited this scandalous painting at his own expense in a building nearby. After just three weeks he had made 1,330 francs profit, which enabled him to travel to Paris with *Night* and present it to the jury for the Salon du Champ-de-Mars. *Night* was one of the 243 works ultimately selected from among 2,070 submissions. The president of the jury, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, was particularly taken with the work, awarding Hodler membership in the Société Nationale des Artistes Français and its silver medal. In this picture, Hodler's first major work, sleeping at night was not a renewal of life energy to be experienced as positive, but the trigger of a life-threatening vision of horror. The central figure, the artist's alter ego, is, as in Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, pursued in his sleep by an uncanny antagonist and finds himself in a mortal struggle, like Laocoön wrestling with the snakes. In *Night*, Hodler summed up the existential angst of fin-de siècle decadence in an inevitable confrontation with the 'other side' of the ideal bourgeois world. From one moment to the next, Hodler had become a famous, and infamous, artist and a focus of attention for one of the most colourful figures of Symbolism – Joséphin Péladan – who founded the Ordre de la Rose-Croix Catholique et Esthétique du Temple et du Graal in 1892 and from 1892 to 1897 organised the Salon de la Rose+Croix at the Galerie Durand-Ruel. The work of other Swiss artists – Albert Trachsel, Eugène Grasset, Rodo de Niederhäusern, Carlos Schwabe and Félix Vallotton – was presented alongside that of Hodler. Because there was no art academy in Switzerland until well into the twentieth century, and Swiss artists could find recognition in their own country only after achieving success abroad, they often developed greater interest in the avant-garde while living in the large centres of European art. Symbolism thus appealed strongly to the general character of a whole generation of Swiss artists and their feeling of struggling in isolation. They sought neither virtuosic mastery of a pre-existing style nor reinterpretation of traditional subject matter, but rather the creation of visionary dream images. The Swiss, who like Hodler drew their artistic originality to a large degree from their own lives and their roots in their origins, produced new, autonomous motifs and images. For example, Hodler's *Night* is significant less as an illustration of Guy de Maupassant's novella 'Le Horla' than as a powerful image of the fear of death that afflicted the artist constantly throughout most of his life. The man haunted by a nightmare is unmistakably a self-portrait. This existential component is a defining feature that is also found in the work of other

KUNSTMUSEUM BERN
MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BERNE
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS BERNE

HODLERSTRASSE 8–12 CH-3000 BERN 7
T +41 31 328 09 44 F +41 31 328 09 55
INFO@KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH WWW.KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH

MEDIEN-SERVICE
SERVICE DE PRESSE / PRESS OFFICE
T +41 31 328 09 19/44
PRESS@KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH

Swiss Symbolists such as Giovanni Segantini, and of course earlier in the work of Henry Fuseli and Arnold Böcklin, the great trailblazers for the artistic revival in around 1890. And it also demonstrates that in their search for the hidden, timeless laws that determined their individual lives, Swiss Symbolists were also able to interpret the landscapes of their homeland, with their mountains and lakes, in brilliant, synthesising, expressionistic ways. The exhibition 'Myths and Mysteries. Symbolism and Swiss Artists' demonstrates that Symbolism was the first international Foreword art movement in which Swiss artists played a leading role as innovators, both in their home country and in the artistic centres of Germany, France and Italy. Following the survey of an era '1900: Symbolismus und Jugendstil in der Schweizer Malerei' (Kunstmuseum Solothurn, the Museo Villa dei Cedri in Bellinzona and the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Sion in 2000), Valentina Anker's epochal work of 2009, *Der Schweizer Symbolismus*, was the first to systematically raise the question of its significance in an international context. This perspective is also crucial to the present exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern and the Museo Cantonale d'Arte in Lugano. Symbolism is discussed as a current of innovation that passed through all areas of art. For that reason, dance and music play an important role in our thematically organised show, alongside paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture, architecture and photography.

It was a stroke of good luck that the partnership between the Museo Cantonale d'Arte in Lugano and the Kunstmuseum Bern was secure from the outset. With respect to Symbolism, the collecting emphases of the two museums complement each other perfectly. Both institutions are delighted that Valentina Anker agreed to curate this project. In contrast to her magnum opus of 2009, for our exhibition she has interwoven the achievements of Swiss artists with international developments. Our exhibition and its publication will thus transform scholarship on international Symbolism by putting the achievements of Swiss artists closer to the creative heart of the movement, unlike the pioneering exhibition 'Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe' in Montreal in 1995.

We wish to thank Valentina Anker and her assistant very sincerely for their great efforts. Not only has Valentina Anker succeeded in fundamentally expanding research on Symbolism, but she has also managed, with admirable perseverance, to illustrate her questions with a wonderful string of pearls composed of unique masterpieces. It includes works that have not been exhibited for many years, as well as a few key new discoveries.

Our profound gratitude thus goes out to the lenders, whose support for this project has been very positive from the outset. The Kunstmuseum Bern was able to organise this ambitious exhibition thanks to the support of its longstanding partner, Credit Suisse. Credit Suisse, which has made art part of the expression of its corporate identity, has supported our work on this exhibition in fundamental ways, and our foundation's board and the museum management would like to express their deep gratitude. The second important partner in this exhibition venture is the Burgergemeinde Bern. We offer sincerest thanks to the Burgergemeinde and its president, Rolf Dähler. The Kunstmuseum Bern was able to obtain additional financial support from the Lotteriefonds des Kantons Bern. Again, the foundation's board and the museum management express their deepest thanks to the Executive Council of the canton of Bern. This very elaborate project was also supported by the Stiftung Vinetum, to whose executive board we are profoundly grateful.

This exhibition, which enables the Swiss public to see an art rooted in German- and Italian-speaking Switzerland within the international context of its time, is fortunate to be placed under the patronage of the Swiss Minister of Culture, Executive Councillor Alain Berset. We also wish to thank

KUNSTMUSEUM BERN
MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BERNE
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS BERNE

HODLERSTRASSE 8–12 CH-3000 BERN 7
T +41 31 328 09 44 F +41 31 328 09 55
INFO@KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH WWW.KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH

MEDIEN-SERVICE
SERVICE DE PRESSE / PRESS OFFICE
T +41 31 328 09 19/44
PRESS@KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH

Bern Executive Councillor Hans-Jürg Käser and the mayor of Bern, Alexander Tschäppät, for their co-patronage.

On behalf of the entire museum staff, I would like to thank Marco Franciulli and his curator Cristina Sonderegger of the Museo Cantonale d'Arte in Lugano for their work, which was outstanding and amicable in every respect. We wish to thank everyone in Bern who worked on the exhibition with such great dedication. Our exhibition designer, Ulrich Zickler, produced a design that is as evocative as it is intelligent, for which congratulate and thank him. Profound thanks are also due to the registrar, Ethel Mathier, and the head of exhibitions, René Wochner, and his team: Thomas Bieri, Jan Bukacek, Mike Carol, Andres Meschter, Martin Schnidrig, Simon Stalder, Roman Studer, Volker Thies, Peter Töni and Wilfried von Gunten. I wish to thank Therese Bhattacharya-Stettler and Daniel Spanke for their critical reading of the German version of the catalogue. I also wish to thank our conservators: Nathalie Bäschlin, Katja Friese, Dorothea Spitz and Miriam Weber. In addition, I extend my warmest thanks to Ruth Gilgen Hamisultane, Brigit Bucher, Anina Büschlen, Aya Christen, Rosmarie Joss, Magdalena Schindler, Christian Schnellmann, Beat Schüpbach and Marie-Louise Suter for their brilliant handling of all aspects of communications and education.

The exhibition is titled 'Myths and Mysteries' because the Symbolists wanted to demonstrate that in a disenchanting everyday world no society could survive without ideal values, without dreams and promises of happiness. In that sense, as well as providing an opportunity to appreciate great classics of fin-de-siècle art, the exhibition also addresses existential questions of our own era. The genre of fantasy, which is infinitely fashionable and widespread today, is nothing other than a late offspring of Symbolism.

KUNSTMUSEUM BERN
MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BERNE
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS BERNE

HODLERSTRASSE 8–12 CH-3000 BERN 7
T +41 31 328 09 44 F +41 31 328 09 55
INFO@KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH WWW.KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH

MEDIEN-SERVICE
SERVICE DE PRESSE / PRESS OFFICE
T +41 31 328 09 19/44
PRESS@KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH