

EN

HODLER

PARALLELISM

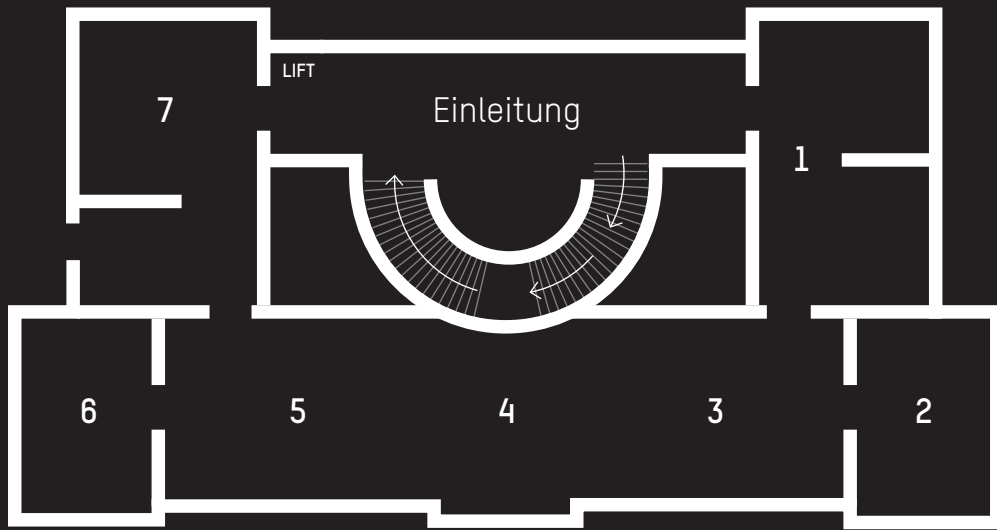
14.09.2018 – 13.01.2019

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EXHIBITION GUIDE

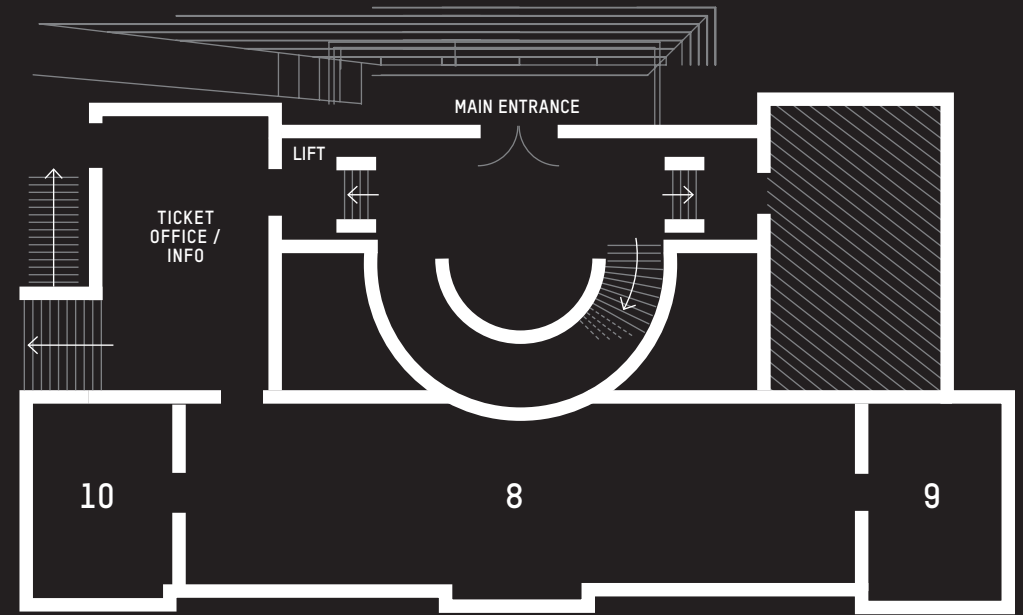
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Introduction

For the first time, the exhibition *Hodler//Parallelism* presents Ferdinand Hodler's work in the light of his theory of parallelism. By this he understood an order underlying nature, and indeed the whole world, and which is manifested in repetitions, symmetries and rhythms. As an artist he saw it as his duty to reveal this fundamental principle in his works. In his lecture on *La mission de l'artiste – The Artist's Mission*, which he delivered in Fribourg on 12 March 1897, he explained:

The artist's mission [...] is to express what is eternal in nature, beauty; to bring out its essential beauty. He emphasises nature by making things clearly visible; he emphasises the forms of the human body. He shows nature enlarged, simplified, freed of all insignificant details.

Hodler attempted to capture the beauty, harmony and unity created, in his view, by parallelism through the repetition of figures, forms and colours. The concept is immediately comprehensible in the three paintings from the group of works ***Lake Thun from Leissigen and Därligen***. All the paintings show the same perspective, except that the detail is changed in terms of altitude, producing different horizons. Hodler chose his position in such a way that the Harder Kulm on the left-hand side and the Därliggrat and the foothills of the Schynige Platte on the right produce a symmetrical composition. At the same time the mountain slopes are reflected in the lake, producing

a horizontal symmetry of form and colour. The harmonic pattern is further intensified in two of the paintings by the strips of cloud that elliptically overlay the landscape and find a formal correspondence at the bottom edge of the painting. A comparison of the three works clearly reveals the progressive formal simplification which reaches its climax in the almost abstract version of 1909. Hodler himself saw the 1905 painting ***Lake Thun with Reflection*** as a key work of parallelism. In a letter to the collector Willy Russ-Young he wrote in the same year:

It may be the landscape in which I most fully applied my compositional principles. It is the most typical and rhythmical through the repetition of the peaks and the shapes in the water.

The exhibition *Hodler//Parallelism* offers you an opportunity to immerse yourself in Hodler's universe and rediscover his clear, powerful pictorial language. In ten chapters his theory and the corresponding compositional principles can be grasped with reference to different groups of works and subjects.

1 Parallelism in nature

In his lecture *The Artist's Mission* Ferdinand Hodler described, with reference to his own observations, how parallelism revealed itself to him in nature. For example he refers to the attraction of a path lined with blossoming lilac bushes, or the pleasant sensation felt at the sight of a **Field of Flowers** (1901) with blossoms of the same colour:

If you look at a field in which only a single species of flowers appears (dandelions, for example), which stand out in yellow against the green background of the grass, you will feel a sense of unity that will charm you.

And he goes on:

If I go into a forest of fir trees in the central region, with very elongated trunks, I have in front of me, on my right and my left the countless columns formed by the tree trunks. Around me I have a vertical line, the same line repeated many times, infinitely. [...] The cause of this impression of unity is the parallelism of the fir tree trunks.

Hodler also pursues this thought in the two paintings **Stroller on the Edge of the Forest** (around 1885) and **The Beech Wood** (1885). In each painting the forest backdrops are similarly composed and, with their strictly vertically oriented trees, clearly display Hodler's principle of parallelism. While in the *Beech Wood* a forester is lost almost unnoticeably in the depths of the filigree trunks, and the viewer's eye can plunge undisturbed into the view of the forest, in the other painting the focus is on the stroller placed in the middle of the painting. We may assume that this is the artist himself, lost in thought on one of his forays through nature.

2 Parallelism of the human figure

Hodler was convinced that parallelism appeared not only in the landscape, but also in the human form and the sceneries of everyday human life:

If there is a party somewhere, you see people going in the same direction. Another time they are assembled around a speaker putting forward an idea. If you step inside a church during the service, you will be impressed by the unity. [...] In all of these examples one has no difficulty in guessing the common principle. [...].

Ferdinand Hodler, *The Artist's Mission*, 1897

As the works in this room make clear, many of Hodler's paintings of groups are characterised by a symmetrical composition. Thus, for example, the painting **The Modern Rütli** (1887–1888) shows the frontal view of the festival architecture of the Swiss marksmen's festival held in Geneva in 1887. In the foreground, in the immediate proximity of the viewer, Hodler stages a greeting between six men. The three pairs of figures are reflected in the central axis of the picture, marked by the grand entrance in the background. Only the flag-bearer on the left-hand side breaks the symmetry. The title refers to the marksmen's festivals held in the 19th century, which were called 'Modern Rütli' in reference to the Rütli Oath, and which were intended, as patriotic events, to promote a national consciousness in the young federal state. With the multiply repeated handshake, Hodler has his protagonists of different ages, origins and social classes, renew the Rütli Oath.

3 The balance of opposing forces

One compositional principle often deployed by Hodler is the balance of opposing forces, as expressed in the **Woodcutter** (around 1910). Standing with legs spread among slender fir trees, he prepares to deliver a mighty blow. The contrast between the vertical tree-trunks and the diagonals of the body gives the painting tension and dynamism. Hodler himself described the **Woodcutter** as 'an incomparable picture of passionate, but deliberate and level-headed power [...]. Every muscle is tensed; it is as if the man, following the upward swing of the axe, wanted to free himself from the ground and soar into the air.' While many of his works are characterised by static, almost contemplative peace, in the woodcutter, and also for example in the **Portrait of Gertrud Müller** (1911), the artist creates an impression of motion and vitality by stressing diagonals.

In 1908, on commission to the Swiss National Bank, Hodler designed the by now iconic subject of the **Woodcutter**, as well as the motif of the **Mower**, as suggestions for the fifty and one hundred frank notes which were in circulation between 1911 and 1957. The artist produced numerous paintings of the two subjects; the **Woodcutter** was particularly popular with collectors and sold well. The 20 or so versions differ from one another only very slightly in the basic features of the composition and the figure, but Hodler varied the landscape. This is apparent in the paintings kept in Paris and Geneva, in which the woodcutter is placed in a wintry landscape.

4 Vertical parallelism

In paintings like **Song in the Distance** (1911) the vertical dominates the composition of the painting as a fundamental pattern. The figure of the woman, dressed in blue and shown frontally, is distinguished by her upright, statue-like posture. This is emphasised by the central placement of the figure below the curved line of the horizon and the symmetry of the synchronously raised arms. The harmony of the depiction is only reduced by the slightly tilted head and the barely noticeable step to the side.

This pictorial invention is one of Hodler's depictions of individual female figures, symbolising a sensation or a sensory impression through gesture and attitude. The overarching theme is the veneration and oneness with nature. The title of the picture suggests that this is about a sensory perception expressed in the hint of a dancing pose, the head tilted slightly to one side and the woman's enraptured expression. The open palms of her hand make it clear that her whole body is becoming an instrument of perception for a sound (of nature).

The painting **Cheerful Woman** (around 1911) acts as a pendant to this work. The structure of the painting is similar, but the figure seen from behind is clearly revealed by the twist of the body, the position of the arms and the turn of the head as a dancer paying tribute to nature in a more expressive way. The curved line of the horizon, which recalls the curve of the earth, is something that Hodler used often, as for example in **Communion with the Infinite** (1892). It enables the artist to introduce a cosmic dimension into the painting. He himself recorded in one of his notebooks: 'The straight line has more of the finite, the curve more of the infinite.'

5 Horizontal parallelism

Many of Hodler's landscapes are dominated by the horizontal. ***Lake Thun with Stockhorn Mountain Range*** (1905) is constructed in several horizontal layers: in the foreground a strip of stones protruding from the water indicates the nearby shore, while the surface of the water, bathed in orange light, is run through by blue horizontal lines that mark individual waves. These stripes are repeated in the middle ground of the lake, dominated by bluish tones, and as strips of cloud in front of the mountain range and in the sky with its orange hue.

The painting is part of a series of 33 views which vary according to weather conditions, season and time of day. There may be several reasons for Hodler's love of the subject: on the one hand the area around Lake Thun was familiar to him from his childhood, and on the other the subject was in great demand among collectors. But the many repetitions express also his tireless quest for form.

Hodler used the same compositional principle for other pictorial genres too. In the ***Portrait of the Dead Augustine Dupin*** (1909) he showed his former companion (and mother of their son Hector), whose dying and death he captured in four paintings. The dead woman lies outstretched on the bed in a blue dress. The detail of the painting is chosen in such a way that her body occupies the entire width of the painting, dominated by the thickly painted ochre-coloured wall, which constitutes about two thirds of the picture surface. Three blue lines form the upper boundary and, in form and colour, represent an analogy to the outstretched corpse.

6 Theory and context

In the series of four self-portraits from 1912 Hodler confronts the viewer with a rigid gaze from wide-open eyes. Theodor Reinhart, who commissioned the first portrait, observed in a letter to the artist: 'Hodler looking into his world, his eye stubborn but all the keener for it.' The painter stages himself as a visual person who assumes the artistic mission of observing the world, exploring its structure and finally making it visible for others in his works.

The artist formulated this view in the manuscript, presented here, of the lecture that he delivered in Fribourg in 1897, which begins with the words 'The artist's mission...'. In it, Hodler set out his theory of parallelism, which he obstinately presented to his colleagues as his discovery or achievement. To his biographer Carl Albert Loosli he said: 'My work stands or falls with the rightness or wrongness of my parallelism. Either parallelism as I have described and applied it is a universal law of general validity, and then my work is of universal significance: or else I am mistaken, and in that case my work is merely self-deception and delusion.'

But as the publications exhibited here clearly reveal, the term parallelism and an interest in repetitions and symmetry were widespread in the contemporary environment around Hodler in a great variety of sciences. Thus, for example, the art theorist Charles Blanc engaged with the phenomenon, and the famous zoologist Ernst Haeckel emphasised symmetry as a constructive principle of nature. Among philosophers and psychologists such as Gustav Theodor Fechner and Ernst Mach the hypothesis of 'psycho-physical parallelism' was discussed, postulating a correspondence between the physical and the psychical, body and soul. So the parallelism that Hodler was able to make so fruitful for his work was clearly in the air.

7 Reduction to the essential: the mountainlandscapes

Hodler's declared goal as an artist to emphasise 'a simplified nature, freed of all insignificant details' becomes particularly apparent in his imposing mountain landscapes. In search of the ideal view he tried out different viewpoints until he found the most effective perspective. Through the choice of picture detail he optimised the composition, as **Mönch with Clouds** (1911) impressively demonstrates: the artist reduced the view of the striking triumvirate of the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau to the central area of peaks, which he placed in isolation in the centre of the picture. This monumentalisation is intensified by the ornamental clouds: they form an echo of the pattern drawn through the snow and surround the peak like an aureole.

Hodler applied a similar treatment to the Niesen, which he preferred to capture from Gunten on Lake Thun, since from there the mountain appeared in a pyramidal shape. As **The Niesen on a Rainy Day** (1910) and the two other versions demonstrate, the artist stuck to this view, and varied it in colour and mood. The painting is characterised by a fine shading of the grey, blue and green tones: Hodler was deeply preoccupied with the effect of colours:

The colour of objects changes according to the colour of the lighting; the shades are entirely different under a grey or a blue sky. [...] The charm of colours lies above all in their chords, in the repetition of shades of a single colour. The gentle harmonies seem to penetrate you more intimately, they really seem to be the favourite chords of the heart.

Ferdinand Hodler, *The Artist's Mission*, 1897

8 Parallelism of sensation

We are aware, and sometimes we all sense, that what unites us is stronger than what distinguishes us. The goal and the most important conditions of life are the same for us all, we all have our joys and sorrows, which are only repetitions, and which communicate themselves through the same gestures or similar gestures, of the given identity of our [bodily] structure.

Ferdinand Hodler, *About the Oeuvre*, 1908

Hodler's concept of parallelism was not restricted to formal aspects, but also extended to the parallels of human sensations. In his large-format paintings of the human figure such as those shown in this room he expressed a variety of mental states.

The artist worked on the idea behind the painting **The Day** (1899–1900) for seven years, in which he pursued various approaches. From the outset the pictorial invention was conceived as a counterpart to the previous 'paintings of destiny' with pessimistic subjects such as **The Night** (1889–1890) and **The Disillusioned** (1892). In one of his notebooks Hodler recorded: 'To the happy, Life/to the unhappy death/to the happy the colours, the brilliancy of day/to the unhappy the blacks of night.' He finally captured the subject in five women waking from sleep. The nudes sitting in a semi-circle on a draped cloth are caught from behind in a bright aura of light. The focus is on the central figure, around which the four others are symmetrically grouped, reflecting one another in pairs in their body posture, gesture and hairstyle. Hodler aimed at immediate comprehensibility in the object of the picture:

I love clarity in a painting, and that is why I love parallelism. In many of my paintings I have chosen four or five figures to express a single feeling, because I know that repetition of a single thing deepens the impression.

Ferdinand Hodler, *About my Artistic Principle and About Klimt*, 1904

9 The portraits

Hodler's best-known work is ***The Night*** (1889–1890). At the centre of the unspecific rocky landscape with sleeping nudes, a figure wrapped in black squats on one of the reclining man who startles from his sleep. The figure bears Hodler's own facial features, which reveal horror and fear. With this painting the artist wanted to depict a totality of impressions from the night. Components of this are sleep, death, horror, the unknown, but also sexuality.

It was precisely this aspect that Geneva City Council took exception to when the work was first shown in the annual exhibition in the Musée Rath. It ordered the removal of the 'immoral' painting even before the opening of the exhibition. The artist protested publicly and instead showed it in the Bâtiment électoral not far from the museum. It was this scandal that made it a success. In the Salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux Arts in Paris he also won recognition for the painting. Finally, in 1900, Hodler made his international breakthrough: he was awarded a Gold Medal of Honour at the World's Fair in Paris for the paintings *The Night*, *The Day* and ***Eurythmy*** (1895). After this the state of Bern bought the three works as well as *The Disillusioned* and gave them to the Kunstmuseum Bern. With the paintings that the artist described as 'Honour Hodlers', four of his works entered a public collection for the first time.

Hodler was greatly in demand as a portrait-painter, and drew much of his income from commissioned works. Primarily, however, his tireless engagement with portraits expresses his interest in human beings – their form, their gaze, their story as reflected in their facial features. He produced some 450 portraits, which constitute around a quarter of his work. Hodler painted celebrities, friends, lovers, but also strangers – and repeatedly himself in different roles. As the selection of portraits in this room shows, he developed different solutions for this important artistic task, which has always been seen as a demanding combination of imitation and art work. One striking thing is Hodler's preference for the frontal portrait. The harmony of this form of representation corresponded to his parallelistic concept:

The symmetry of left and right in the human body, symmetrical opposition, [...] is that not a phenomenon of parallelism?

Ferdinand Hodler, *The Artist's Mission*, 1897

In the ***Portrait of Louis de Romain*** (1897) – composer, musician, critic and author – the concentrated effect of this formulation becomes apparent: the upright head and the arms, cut off at the sides, convey an impression of presence and authority. After the turn of the century the artist chose this pictorial solution particularly for his male models. By contrast, when painting portraits of women he often opted for poses stressing the charm of the sitter – a slightly tilted head, turned slightly in profile, or a seductive glance over the shoulder, as in the ***Portrait of Valentine Godé-Darel*** (1909), his lover of many years.

10 The late Lake Geneva landscapes

During a walk in 1917 Hodler explained the effect that the landscape of Lake Geneva had on him to the journalist Johannes Widmer:

You see how everything over there dissolves into lines and space? Don't you feel as if you were standing on the edge of the world and communing freely with the universe? That's what I'm going to paint from now on!

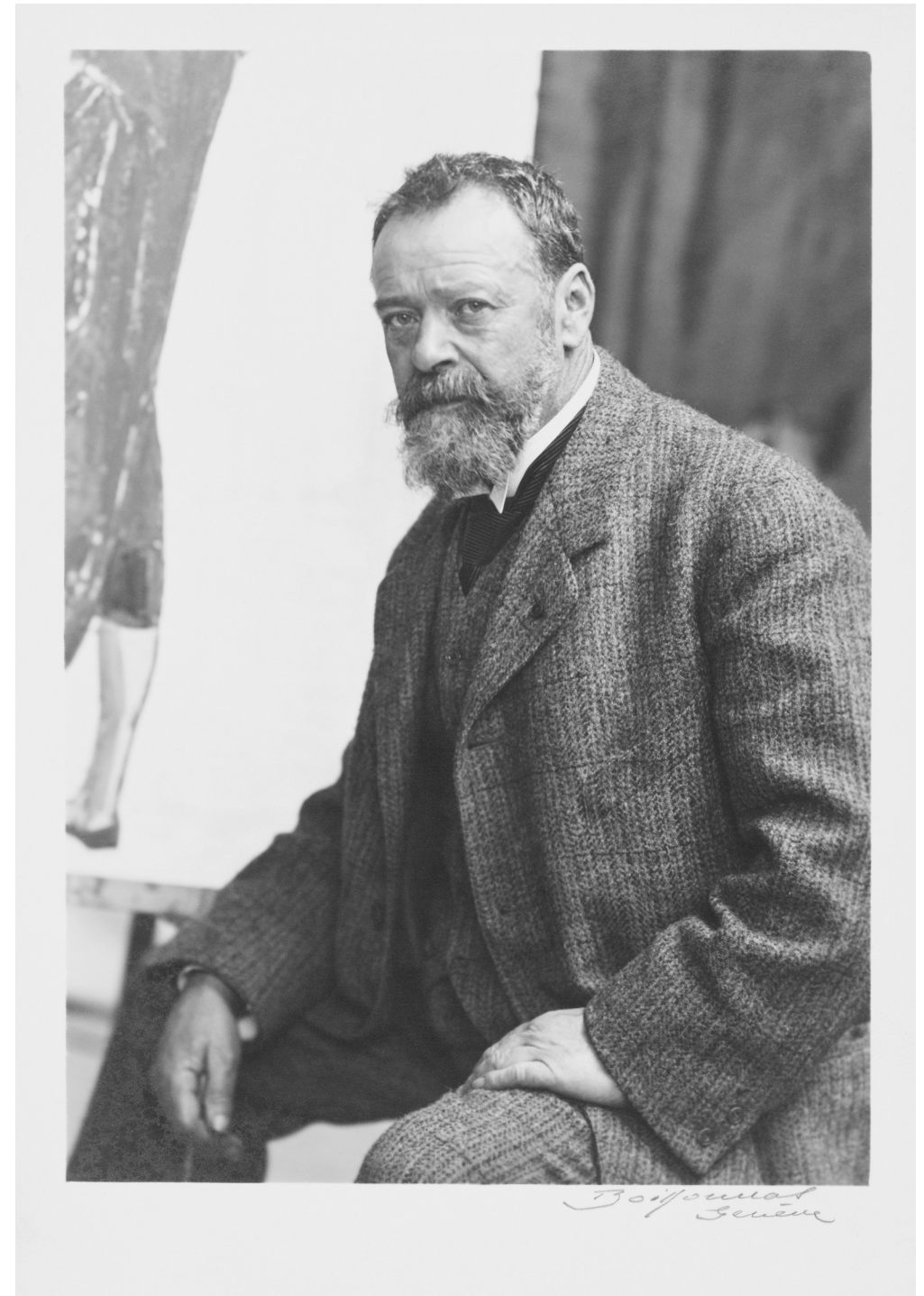
'Paysages planétaires' was the name that Hodler gave to the landscapes whose cosmic dimension he wanted to relate to. It is sensed in the series **Lake Geneva with Mont-Blanc** (1917–1918), the works in which are distinguished by a parallel pictorial composition without lateral boundaries. Hodler was attempting to evoke the unrepresentable infinite as an idea in the viewer, as he strove to do with suggestive titles in other works.

In the paintings Hodler shows the view from his window of the lake and the Savoy Alps in slightly differencing details. After he fell ill in the autumn of 1917, he had a studio set up for him in his Geneva flat on the Quai du Mont-Blanc, where he painted over 20 landscapes until his death on 19 May 1918. In these last works he placed particular value on colour, which he no longer wished to subordinate to form.

Now I have both, and more than ever the colour does not only accompany the form; instead the form lives, curves, through the colour. And now it is wonderful. Now I have the large spaces.

Johannes Widmer, *Von Hodlers letztem Lebensjahr*, 1919

In the mystical, almost abstract morning and afternoon landscapes the artist celebrated light and colours, and fulfilled his self-imposed task of conveying to the viewer 'a greater nature, simplified and freed from all insignificant details'.



Ferdinand Hodler, around 1915
Photo: Frédéric Boissonnas © Sammlung Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur

Biography

1853	Ferdinand Hodler is born in Bern, the oldest of six children	12. March 1897	In his lecture in Fribourg about <i>La Mission de l'Artiste – The Artist's Mission</i> he explains parallelism
1868–1870	Studies with the veduta painter Ferdinand Sommer in Thun	From 1900	Hodler becomes a member of the Secessions in Vienna, Berlin and Munich, participates in numerous exhibitions and receives public commissions, including works for Jena University, Kunsthaus Zürich and Hanover City Hall. But his work continues to prompt controversy
1871/1872	Hodler moves to Geneva, to copy works by the Alpine painters Alexandre Calame und François Diday in the Musée Rath; 1872 settles in Geneva	1900 /1901	For the paintings <i>The Day</i> , <i>The Night</i> and <i>Eurythmy</i> Hodler wins the Gold Medal of Honour at the World's Fair in Paris. In 1901 the state of Bern acquires the three key works as well as <i>The Disappointed Souls</i> . They are Hodler's first paintings in a public collection
1873	The start of a four-year training as a pupil with Barthélemy Menn, who has taught at the École de figure in Geneva since 1850	1909	Death Augustine Dupin
1874	First prize at the Concours Calame with <i>Forest Interior (Le Nant de Frontenex)</i> followed by intensive participation in regional and national exhibitions, tenders and competitions	1910	Basel University awards Hodler an honorary doctorate
1881	Assistant to Edouard Castres in the making of the Bourbaki-Panorama in Lucerne	1913	Birth of Pauline-Valentine, called Paulette, from Hodler's relationship with Valentine Godé-Darel. The French Légion d'Honneur appoints him officer
1887	The Kunstmuseum Bern holds the artist's first solo exhibition Birth of son Hector, from Hodler's relationship with Augustine Dupin, who modelled for various works by Hodler	1914	After signing a petition against the shelling of Reims Cathedral by the German artillery as part of the Geneva Protest of 1914, business and artistic relations with Germany were severed
1889	Marries Bertha Stucki, divorcing her two years later	1915	Death of Valentine Godé-Darel, whose battle against cancer Hodler records in more than 200 drawings and paintings
1891	<i>The Night</i> is a triumph at the Salon du Champ-de-Mars in Paris, after having previously been removed from an exhibition in the Musée Rath in Geneva on grounds of immorality	1916	Receives an honorary professorship from Geneva Art Academy
1895–1896	Execution of the warrior figures for the national exhibition in Geneva. Hodler's works lead to a furore in the press	1917	First retrospective in Kunsthaus Zürich with more than 600 works
1896	Unsuccessful participation in the competition for the decoration of Bern City Hall	1918	Hodler is given the freedom of the City of Geneva. Because of illness, he goes on working in his flat on Quai du Mont-Blanc. He dies of a pulmonary edema on 19 May
1897	With <i>Retreat from Marignano</i> , Hodler wins the competition for the decoration of the armoury in the National Museum Zurich; the execution prompts an intense public dispute about art. Marries Berthe Jacques		

The exhibition

Duration of the exhibition	14.09.2018 – 13.01.2019
Entrance fees	CHF 22.00 /red. CHF 18.00
Opening hours	Mondays closed, Tuesday 10 a.m – 9 p.m. Wednesday to Sunday 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.
Public holidays	Open on December 24th and 26th 2018, January 1st and 2nd 2019: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed on December 25th 2018

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