



Hodler//Parallelism

14.09.2018 – 13.01.2019

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Contact

Maria-Teresa Cano

Head of Communication and Public Relations Kunstmuseum Bern – Zentrum Paul Klee
press@kunstmuseumbern.ch, Tel.: +41 31 328 09 44



1. General information

Duration of the exhibition

14.09.2018 – 13.01.2019

Team of curators

Nina Zimmer, Kunstmuseum Bern – Zentrum Paul Klee
Laurence Madeline, Paris

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Kanton Bern
Credit Suisse
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DE GENÈVE**

2. The exhibition

In his compositions, Ferdinand Hodler attempts to implement his ideas about parallelism, striving for beauty, harmony, and unity through the repetition of figures, forms, and colours. The exhibition *Hodler//Parallelism* presents, in ten sections, an opportunity to comprehend his theories and the related compositional principles in various bodies of his work and in a diversity of motifs.

1. Parallelism in Nature

In his lecture *Die Aufgabe des Künstlers* (The quest of the artist) Ferdinand Hodler describes, based on his own observations, how for him parallelism is revealed in nature. In this context he points out the beauty of a path lined by lilac bushes in bloom or the pleasing effect of a meadow of flowers of the same colour as in ***Field of Flowers*** (1901). Hodler pursues this idea also in the two paintings ***Stroll on the Edge of the Forest*** (ca. 1885) and ***The Beech Wood*** (1885). In both works the forest backdrop has been similarly constructed and underscores Hodler's principle of parallelism in the strong vertical emphasis of the trees. Whereas in *Buchenwald* a woodsman is almost lost in the thicket of thin trunks and lacy branches so that the beholders can immerse themselves in the forest scene without being distracted, the focus in the other painting is on the strolling person at the centre of the composition. Presumably it is the artist himself, lost in thought while exploring the woods.

2. Parallelism of the Human Figure

Hodler was convinced that parallelism was not only evidenced in landscape but equally manifest in the human figure and in scenes of everyday life. As the works in this section palpably illustrate, many of Hodler's group compositions stand out on account of their symmetrical construction. The painting ***The modern Grütli*** (1887–1888), for example, presents a frontal view of the festive architecture of the *Eidgenössische Schützenfest*, the Swiss marksmen's festival that took place in Geneva in 1887. Hodler stages the *Grütli*, where six men greet one another in the foreground in close proximity to the beholder. The three pairs of figures create a mirror image along the central axis of the composition, which is accentuated by the imposing entrance in the background. Only the standard-bearer on the left breaks the symmetry. The title *Le Grütli moderne* refers to the Swiss marksmen's festivals that took place in the nineteenth century, which were called *Schützenfeste* in reminiscence of the *Rütlichschwur*, the legendary oath of the Old Swiss Confederacy. The *Schützenfeste* were patriotic events to foster national consciousness in the young national state. By repeating the act of shaking hands and representing the various ages, backgrounds, and classes, Hodler has the protagonists renew the *Rütlichschwur* in a contemporary setting.

3. Balancing Out Opposing Forces

A principle that Hodler often employs in his compositions is balancing out opposing forces, as is expressed in ***Woodcutter*** (ca. 1910). The figure of the woodcutter stands with his legs wide apart between slender firs, bracing himself to swing the axe with incredible force. The contrast between the vertical trunks of the trees and the diagonal stance of the figure imbues the painting with tension and dynamism. While many of his works stand out owing to their static, rather contemplative calm, in the woodcutter painting the artist produces an overriding



impression of motion and animation by emphasizing diagonal lines, just as he did in **Portrait of Gertrud Müller** (1911).

4. Vertical Parallelism

Verticals dominate in the basic arrangement of the composition in paintings such as **Song in the Distance** (1911). The female figure is depicted frontally and wears a blue dress. Her upright, decidedly statuesque pose is striking. The pictorial invention of this work can be grouped among Hodler's representations of individual female figures symbolizing an emotion or sensation. The greater theme is the worship of nature and being at one with it.

5. Horizontal Parallelism

In many of Hodler's landscapes the horizontal line dominates. A number of horizontal bands determine the structure of **Lake Thun with Stockhorn Mountain Range** (1905). In the foreground a strip of rocks jutting out of the water suggest the proximity of the shore while the water surface, bathed in orange-coloured light, is interspersed by blue horizontal lines that highlight individual waves. These lines are echoed in the middle-ground of the lake, where blue is the predominant hue, and in the strips of clouds hanging in front of the mountains and in the predominantly orange-tinged sky.

6. Theory and Context

In the series of four self-portraits dating from 1912, Hodler confronts his viewers with a fixed gaze and eyes wide open. The painter is staging his visual orientation, as a person whose artistic calling is to observe the world around him, fathom its structures, and ultimately make this all visible for others in his work. The artist formulated the same in the manuscript presented here. It is from the lecture he presented in Fribourg in 1897 and began with the words «the quest of the artist». In the lecture Hodler explains his theory of parallelism, which he obstinately claims to be his discovery and achievement towards his colleagues. As the other publications among the exhibits here underscore, however, the concept of parallelism and interest in repetition and symmetry among Hodler's contemporaries was widespread in a diversity of sciences.

7. Reduction to Essentials: Alpine Landscapes

Hodler declared that his goal as an artist was to show nature in its true light by presenting simplified nature, nature «free of all the meaningless details». This is especially true for his imposing alpine landscapes. In search of ideal views he tried out numerous vantage points until he found the most powerful one. His choice of framing optimised the composition.



8. Parallelism of the Emotions

Hodler's notion of parallelism was not only restricted to the formal aspects of painting but extended also to parallels that can be found in human emotions. In his large-format paintings of figural groups, as can be viewed in this section, he expressed diverse emotions.

9. The Portraits

Hodler was much in demand as a portrait painter and was able to earn a considerable part of his income through commissions for the same. But his untiring fascination for the portrait genre demonstrates first and foremost his interest in people – what they look like, their gaze, and their history as it is reflected in their faces. He executed some 450 portraits, comprising about a quarter of his entire oeuvre. Hodler portrayed famous people, friends, his lovers, as well as strangers – and repeatedly himself in different roles. As the selection of portraits in this section shows, he evolved various solutions for this important artistic genre, which has always comprised the challenging combination of imitation and art. Hodler fostered a decided preference for frontal views of his sitters; the symmetry of this kind of representation conforms with his conception of parallelism.

10. The Late Landscapes of Lake Geneva

Hodler called those landscapes «paysages planétaires» in which he sought to articulate their cosmic dimensions. The series **Lake Geneva with Mont Blanc** (1917/1918) appears to attempt this. Outstanding in this body of works is that the parallel lines used to construct the individual paintings seem unlimited, with nothing interrupting them either to the left or the right. In these works Hodler attempts to conjure up the idea of infinity in the beholder, something that cannot be represented, as he strived to do in other works by means of suggestive titles.

In this series Hodler presents views from his window of Lake Geneva and the Savoy Alps by slightly varying the framing of the individual scenes. After becoming ill in the autumn of 1917, he had part of his residence on Quai du Mont-Blanc in Geneva converted into a studio, where he painted over twenty landscapes before he died on 19 May 1918. In these final works he emphasized in particular the value of colour, which he no longer regarded as subservient to form.

3. Quotes – Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918)

«It is the quest of the artist to express the eternal element of nature and beauty, and reveal its essential beauty. Artists show nature in its true light by making things clearly visible. They put the forms of the human body in the right light; they show us a nature that is larger than life, one that is simplified and free of all the meaningless details. »

«If you look at a meadow in which only a single species of flower is in bloom (for example dandelion flowers), where the yellow of these flowers stands out against the green of the grass, you will experience a feeling of unity that fills you with delight. »

«When I go into the middle regions of a forest of firs, where the trees have very tall trunks, I see before me, to my right and to my left, those countless columns formed by these tree trunks. All around me I see vertical lines, the same line, multiple times, infinitely repeated. [...] This impression is caused by the parallelism of the trunks of the firs. »

«If people get together to celebrate somewhere, you can notice how they all start moving in the same direction. In other situations they crowd around a speaker elucidating his or her ideas. If you go into a church during service you are struck by the unity. [...] Without making an effort in all these examples you can sense what the uniting principle is. »

«The success or failure of my work depends wholly on whether my parallelism is true or not. Parallelism is, as I discovered it, have described it, and employ it, either a universal law and is universally valid – and then my work has universal meaning – or I was wrong, and then my art is nothing but a delusion and misconception. »

«The colours of things change in relation to the colour of the lighting; gradations of tones are very different in a grey or a blue sky. [...] The appeal of colours lies especially in their harmoniousness, in the repetition of nuanced tones of the same colour. Gentle harmonies appear to affect us more profoundly; they seem to really be the preferred harmonious tones of our souls. »

«We are conscious of the fact that what unites us is stronger than what sets us apart from one another – and occasionally each and every one of us feels that this is so. The goal of life and the principle conditions for it are the same for all of us. We all experience our joys and sorrows. All of these things are repetitions and are articulated by the same gestures or by analogous gestures, revealing our essential structure in a given identity. »

«I love clarity in a painting and therefore I love parallelism. In many of my compositions I have chosen four or five figures in order to express one and the same emotion. I do this because I know that repetition of one and the same thing enhances the effect. »

«The symmetry of right and left in the human body, bilateral symmetry – is it not a phenomenon of parallelism?»



4. Biography Ferdinand Hodler

1853

Ferdinand Hodler was born on 14 March in Bern as the oldest of six children.

1868–1870

Apprenticeship with vedute painter Ferdinand Sommer in the commune of Thun.

1871/1872

Hodler hiked to Geneva to copy the works of the alpine landscape painters Alexandre Calame and François Diday at the Musée Rath; in 1872 he settled in Geneva.

1873

Began a four-year traineeship as a student under Barthélemy Menn, who had been teaching at the Ecole de figure in Geneva since 1850.

1874

Won first prize in the Concours Calame with *Waldinneres (Le Nant de Frontenex)* and from then on intensively participated in regional and national exhibitions, competed for commissions and awards.

1881

Edouard Castres's assistant in executing the Boubaki panorama in Lucerne.

1887

The Kunstmuseum Bern mounted the artist's first solo exhibition.

His son Hector was born, child of Hodler's relationship with Augustine Dupin, who was his model in various works.

1889

Married Bertha Stucki and obtained a divorce two years later.

1891

The Night celebrates a veritable triumph at the Salon du Champ-de-Mars in Paris after its exclusion from an exhibition at Musée Rath in Geneva on moral grounds.

1895–1896

Executed war figures for the national exhibition in Geneva. Hodler's exhibits were contentiously debated in the press.

1896

Was unsuccessful in the competition for the decoration of the town hall in Bern.

1897

Hodler won the competition for decorating the arms room of the Landesmuseum Zürich with his *Retreat from Marignano*. The execution of the commission triggered an intense public art debate. Married Berthe Jacques.

12 March 1897

In his lecture in Fribourg *La Mission de l'Artiste* (The task of the artist) he explained the theory of parallelism.

1900/1901

For the paintings *The Day*, *The Night*, and *Eurhythmy*, Hodler was awarded the honorary gold medal at the World Fair in Paris. In 1901, the state of Bern purchased these three key works of the artist as well as *The Disappointed Souls* for the Kunstmuseum Bern. They are the first of his paintings to become part of a public collection.

From 1900 onwards

Hodler became a member of the Secession associations in Vienna, Berlin, and Munich. He mounted many exhibitions and received public commissions, for example from Jena University, Kunsthaus Zürich, or the town hall in Hanover. His art continued to excite controversy.

1909

Death of Augustine Dupin.

1910

Hodler received an honorary doctorate from Basel University.

1913

Pauline-Valentine, called Paulette, was born of Hodler's relationship with Valentine Godé-Darel. Hodler was appointed officer of the National Order of the Legion of Honour.

1914

After signing the Geneva petition in 1914 against the bombing of Reims Cathedral by German artillery, Hodler was expelled from all artists' associations in Germany and could no longer sell his art there.

1915

Death of Valentine Godé-Darel, whose struggle fighting cancer Hodler captured in over 200 drawings and paintings.

1916

Was appointed an honorary professorship at the art academy in Geneva.

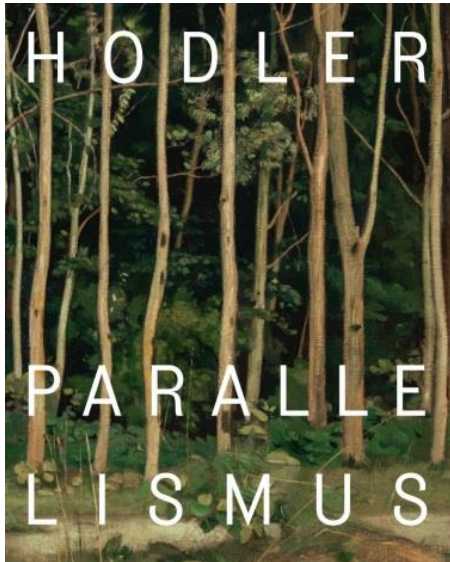
1917

His first retrospective was held at the Kunsthaus Zürich with over 600 pieces.

1918

Hodler was made honorary citizen of the City of Geneva. Owing to sickness he worked from this time onward in his abode on Quai du Mont Blanc. He died on 19 May from a pulmonary oedema.

5. Accompanying volume published for the exhibition



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A cooperation of Kunstmuseum Bern and Musées d'art et d'histoire de Genève

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