

Ferdinand Hodler, Painter of the Nation

Autor(en): **Hirsh, Sharon L.**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Outlines**

Band (Jahr): **4 (2009)**

PDF erstellt am: **12.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-872211>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern. Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

Haftungsausschluss

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

SHARON L. HIRSH

Ferdinand Hodler, Painter of the Nation

The nationalistic significance of specific images continually addressed by Hodler – his historical projects and his mountains in particular – have already been the subject of several important exhibitions and articles.¹ For this study, however, I would like to investigate Hodler's nationalism in a broader context, namely nationalism and internationalism in art; this pan-European development during the second half of the nineteenth century had the power to transform perceptions of Hodler's work in the 1890s – in Hodler's audience as well as in Hodler himself – from instinctively regionalist views into nationalistic visions. The most obvious examples of such a transformation can be found in Hodler's landscapes. In his early work under Barthélemy Menn, Hodler's landscapes are usually casual topical views of a particular area, often carefully described as such in the title, as in *Spring Meadow at Salève*, 1888 (fig. 1). In this canvas, only a small portion of the mountain seen from the foothills is included, but every wild flower and blade of grass is evident in the foreground. Beginning with Hodler's first Symbolist landscape, *Herbstabend*,² however, Hodler's landscapes take on an increasingly broad and abstracted perspective and style, resulting in the iconic late mountainscapes such as *The Breithorn*, 1911 (fig. 2). Factors resulting in the changes between these two very different landscapes are multiple and complex, but one of the more compelling factors was that of nationalism, which affected Hodler most strongly in the mid-1890s, when he and all Swiss citizens were in the throes of assessing and formulating a new self-image of Switzerland as a nation. As many historians have established, most western nations were at this time in the process of 'inventing' or 'reinventing' individual nationhood. Most important for Hodler's work in this context is the role of art in the crafting of new national identities: especially in Europe, as nation-building grew throughout the nineteenth century, the expected role for art had grown incrementally to the point of art in general being identified as *inherently* nationalistic. In this broader arena, then, we can recognize that *all* of Hodler's works – not only his mountains or his Swiss historical paintings – were produced in this international framework of nationalism and were certainly

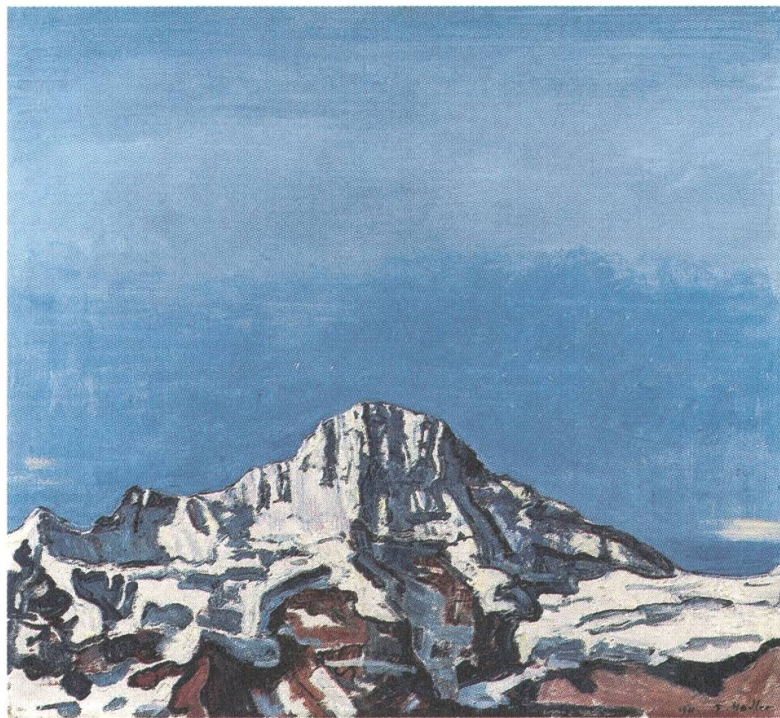


1 *Spring Meadow at Salève*, 1888, oil on canvas, 80,5 x 100,5 cm, private collection

understood and appreciated at the time as nationalistic. Furthermore, because Switzerland in art and literature had, by 1900, adopted a 'self-image' as a tourist destination, it may well have encouraged two additional aspects of Hodler's twentieth-century work, beyond subject matter. These are firstly Hodler's twentieth-century abstracted style, which has elsewhere been properly related to his moving from French to Germanic influence, but is also in part a result of his no longer needing local detail as he did in his earlier work.³ Secondly, he continued to eschew city and urban views in favour of embracing nature, making broad rural or mountain landscapes characteristic of his mature work.

Hodler as Regionalist

In Hodler's early work, beginning with his tutelage under Menn, we find, with the obvious exception of those paintings produced during his short stay in Spain, that he was, predictably and probably inevitably, a 'regional' artist. Painting what he knew best, and assuming in most cases a completely Swiss audience, his subjects, whether the landscape around him, portraits of friends and relatives, or interior scenes, were inherently Swiss; so also was the immediate interpretation and appreciation of such subjects. Unlike his later Symbolist paintings titled with



2 *The Breithorn*, 1911, oil on canvas, 70 x 77 cm, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Dr. Max Kuhn Foundation

symbolic references, Hodler in his early work either did not title landscapes or scenes or often gave very specific titles identifying the very local place of origin.

It is now well known that Hodler's earliest work, painted as a young man under Ferdinand Sommer, was specifically aimed at tourists who had come to the Oberland area to enjoy, as outsiders, a preconceived and already 'packaged' identity of Switzerland as the beautiful, clean and safe 'playground of the world' – a phrase which by 1900 was the most published slogan about Switzerland for foreign visitors, who played an increasingly important economic role in most of western Europe. Tourism had begun in the eighteenth century and had developed into an actual industry by the mid-nineteenth century, and it was this tourism – from the Baedeker Guide to the huge hotels – which informed Hodler's earliest approaches to painting. Caricatures published in Hodler's native Geneva, for example, regularly made fun of the fact that the Swiss mountains – once approachable only by eye from a distant foothill – were now the site of hundreds of new inns and a burgeoning industry of alpine guides.⁴

When he came to Geneva, then, Hodler would have continued this regionalist presumption – that when he painted any subject, it would be from the world around him, and therefore be inherently Swiss, although local. As such, however,

it had the potential of being perceived as nationalist; Menn, Hodler's first real teacher and true mentor, would have encouraged this, if only unconsciously. Menn, whose ties to France were very strong, and who remained close to his Parisian training and friends, was nonetheless a Swiss citizen who had returned to teach in Geneva, and who would remain there for the rest of his life. He modelled for the young Hodler a career path that included non-Swiss residences at times for training and interaction of ideas, but which remained centred essentially at home, essentially Swiss. Yet Hodler's first essays at foreign exhibitions, eventually rewarded with an honourable mention at a Parisian Salon in 1887 were explicitly encouraged by Menn, who always assumed an international audience for his own work. Hodler acknowledged and even explained this approach in 1891, when his work was finally acclaimed in Paris, as he wrote to a friend, 'My goal remains Paris. The German Swiss will not understand me until they see that I have been understood elsewhere; also, only then will I impress the French Swiss.'

The painting that garnered the Paris honourable mention for Hodler (after much working and re-working following two earlier rejections) was *Procession of Wrestlers II* (fig. 4, p. 154). Here it is not just the flag dominating the composition that identifies the subject as Swiss; rather, it is almost everything else in the painting as well. We now know that these were not the sports-trained wrestlers that could be seen at international events, but rather the 'farm wrestlers' that went back to medieval folk traditions in Switzerland; anyone knowing these traditions would recognize the very presence of these types of wrestlers as Swiss.⁶ But as soon as Hodler sent the painting to Paris and it was accepted, that new international recognition made the painting even more 'Swiss' – in whatever manner possible, be it subject or even style or technique, because that was the assumed framework in which every critic and even every viewer was by that time accustomed to see and to respond to all art: to understand art as an expression of nationalism.

International Nationalism in Art

The background to this 'international' nationalism context is an important component in understanding Hodler's identity as 'Painter of the Nation'. Although now recognized as a Symbolist, in most of his work of the 1890s Hodler was not like the legendary Symbolist artists who searched for an alternative life by leaving their homeland. The constructed narrative of the 'troubled' Vincent Van Gogh was that he fled his native Netherlands to try Paris and then retreated to a calmer (he felt more authentic) Arles. The most famous Symbolist flight was that of

Gauguin, for whom Provence was not 'primitive' enough, and who ended his life in Tahiti. Hodler instead was aligned with the more numerous Symbolists who, while achieving acclaim on an international stage, essentially stayed at home (Edvard Munch, for example, always ended his peripatetic travels by returning home to Oslo, and James Ensor or Xavier Mellery lived in small Belgian towns for their entire lives). For all of these artists, then, there was a complex commitment to nationalism: to their regional sense of identity, to a broader set of national issues being discussed at the time and to the political but also tourist-related nation-building self-identity that was being played out in competitive international relations.

Just as Hodler's work was readily relatable to Swiss subjects and issues (and I have elsewhere argued that it was even very Genevan, as evidenced in the many local caricatures that relate Hodler's work to Geneva politics),⁷ so also was his work appreciated as necessarily 'Swiss' by international viewers. The evolution of nationalistic identity in art had already begun, as Janis Tomlinson has shown, in the early nineteenth century in the most established nations – England, France, and Spain. This was achieved through increasingly nationalistic public art policies, by means of the first national museums, of collecting policies for 'national schools', and even of critical reception (within each nation but in constant dialogue with other nations).⁸ By mid-century, just as this complex development crystallized on a national scale (when critics spoke of 'our Spanish school' or 'historic French art'), the shift towards discourse on an international level came of age with the first international World's Fair in 1851 in London. That fair, mounted in the spectacular Crystal Palace in England, set a standard for showcasing the competitive accomplishments of participating nations by means of display; visual culture unquestionably constituted the most potent vehicle for the dissemination of cultural ideas in an era in which literacy was far from universal. Following the 1867 World's Fair in Paris, the critic Ernest Chesneau published his mammoth *Rival Nations in Art*, with the telling subtitle *About the Influence of the International Expositions on the Future of Art*. Here, he not only chronicled the art of different nations, but attempted to rank them – from worst to best – in terms of their nationalistic expression. Chesneau was particularly concerned about the internationalization of visual art and its effect on new or underdeveloped nations whose national art was not yet formed: he predicted that these nations might simply borrow the process and style of others' art, resulting in 'mechanically reproduced' art that would lose its ability to convey sincere native expression. In this, Chesneau was not alone; his contemporaries also believed that the well-spring of

'true' or 'sincere' expression (later allied with modernism) could be found in nativism. By Chesneau's time, national art was no longer simply self-identification, however. By virtue of the inevitable comparisons such as his, there was new pressure for each nation's art to be distinguishable from all others; this was not only self-identification but also self-promotion.

When discussed in these terms, 'Swiss art' did not fare well. In comparison to the more established nations, Switzerland did not have the history of collecting or the history of national imagery on which the others could rely. Switzerland also had the considerable 'problem' of a multilingual population. This meant that even the most common denominator of national common identity – 'blood and soil' as it was called – would not work well for Switzerland. So just as Switzerland, like most other 'young' nations, began to 'invent' or 'imagine' (as Benedict Anderson has termed it)⁹ its collective community, with a reinvention of the Rütli oath or a new emphasis on the legend of William Tell, critics internationally were lamenting that Switzerland had no national style, explaining that instead artists in Switzerland tended to absorb the style native to their particular language: the French-speaking Swiss emulated French art while the German-speaking Swiss were more Germanic in their expression.¹⁰ Like Italy and Germany, Switzerland was only recently united through the first ever federal constitution of 1848, but it differed significantly because it did not share the sense of ethnic, linguistic or geographic unity to which these other areas could turn in crafting nationalism. The late-century 'new nationalism' that arose in the aftermath of Darwinism, monism, and other hereditary theories, with their emphasis on shared language and culture, and especially 'blood', was therefore not so easily justified for the Swiss. By contrast, the primary sense of unity and collective purpose for Switzerland had always been political; what Gustav Hunziker has distinguished as the Swiss *Willensnation* (nation of will), rather than the German or Italian *Kulturnationen* (culture nations), is based on the fact that the original Swiss alliances were militarily motivated.¹¹ The Swiss traced the source of their confederation back to the Perpetual Alliance of 1291 and the 1307 agreement of the founding cantons – notably all forest and mountain cantons – to join together in common reaction against the Habsburgs and others. Given these historical defensive rationales to Swiss unity, coinciding in the nineteenth century with a perceived need for more organic rationales, there was by the 1890s a concerted effort on the part of Swiss nationalists to find – and have accepted – a common and 'native' bond as well.

This all came to an identity 'crisis' in 1900, when each nation exhibiting at the Paris World's Fair that year was asked to build a pavilion in its 'most typical

nationalist style'. For Switzerland, the result was a reversion to the more rural and Germanic wood chalet style of the Bernese in tourist advertisements in the 1890s.

'The Hodler Problem'

In this context, it is possible to understand the complexity of the 'Hodler Problem', as his fight over the acceptance of the *Battle of Marignano* (figs. 10–14, pp. 114–117) murals for the new National Museum in Zurich was called. Born in the Germanic Bernese Oberland and inculcated at an early age with that imagery, including tourist imagery, Hodler moved to Francophile Geneva where he was encouraged to compete in Paris by Menn, and was further encouraged to exhibit in Paris by his Genevan/Parisian Symbolist friends. By 1891, when he wrote 'My goal remains Paris', he had expressed his goal not only to be known internationally but also that, by virtue of that level of international exhibition, he would be known, no matter what his subject or style, as a Swiss artist making Swiss art.

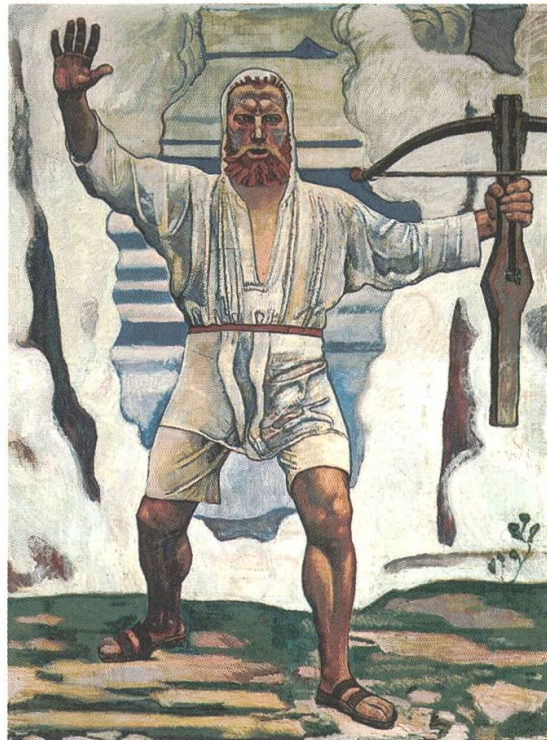
Both the nationalistic and international pressures and expectations for art were definitely at work in Switzerland by the 1890s. A caricature in the Geneva local journal *Carillon de Saint-Gervais*, published in 1891 (the year of the opening of the new National Museum), in which many symbols as well as paintings of Swiss history are lampooned is entitled 'Encore des Artistes Nationaux'. Referring to the many efforts of the new federalism sweeping the nation following the new constitution of 1848, the caption below this cartoon about Swiss unity reads 'Nous recevons d'un correspondant de Berne une superbe chromo que nous reproduisons aussi fidèlement que possible. Nos hautes autorités fédérales pourront se convaincre qu'il existe encore des artistes en Suisse.' We can presume that the Genevan public for cartoons such as this was well aware of the point of the joke – that others in international circles were convinced that the Swiss had no national 'art', 'artists', or even 'style', and that the current efforts to mount a major national art program were seemingly trying to correct that opinion. It was clear that the federal authorities were concerned about nationalistic images that would suit the newly centralized government of the Swiss nation, and even as they opened a new 'National Museum'. Just as new nationalism encouraged strong new symbols of a united nation evolving under a new constitution, so also the international community had expressed expectations of a new uniquely 'Swiss' imagery and style. In this context, we can begin to see Hodler's search for increasingly abstracted and universal – yet Swiss – symbolism in a new light.

The change in Hodler's style in the mid-1890s, from delicate strokes of pastel colours and elongated, thin shapes to a stronger bolder style and more muscular



3 *The Consecrated One*, 1893/1894, tempera and oil on canvas, 219 x 296 cm, Kunstmuseum Berne, on permanent loan from the Gottfried Keller Foundation

figures is also relatable to this complex intersection of nationalism and internationalism at that time. A good example is the critical reception of his *The Consecrated One* (fig. 3), painted 1893–1894 and exhibited in several different Salons over the following two years. While praised in Paris, this painting, which emulated in style and subject the Pre-Raphaelite-influenced Parisian Symbolist art, was subject to criticism from the Swiss since it seemed to be ‘sickly’. By 1895, one Bernese critic explained this difference in interpretation explicitly as nationalistic when he urged Hodler to give up the ‘neo-Catholic, consumptive anachronisms [dreamed up in] the Absinthe-drunk brains of Parisian artistic candidates for the nerve disease clinic’, and to remember his ‘good Swiss blood’.¹² By offering a medical ‘diagnosis’ of Hodler’s delicate style with a nationalistic interpretation of Swiss blood as more ‘healthy’ than that of the French, this anonymous critic was conflating ‘conditions’ that were, at that time, not only assumed but celebrated. Certainly, Hodler’s friend Albert Trachsel saw similar problems with foreign art in his desire to see a true ‘Swiss style’ and ‘Swiss art’ emerge as a part of the new important place of Switzerland on the competitive international art stage. In 1890, as a response to Switzerland’s ‘First National Exhibition of Art’ in Berne that year, Trachsel wrote ‘Some Words about Swiss Art’, in which he argued that the



4 *Wilhelm Tell*, 1897, oil on canvas, 256 x 199 cm, Kunstmuseum Solothurn

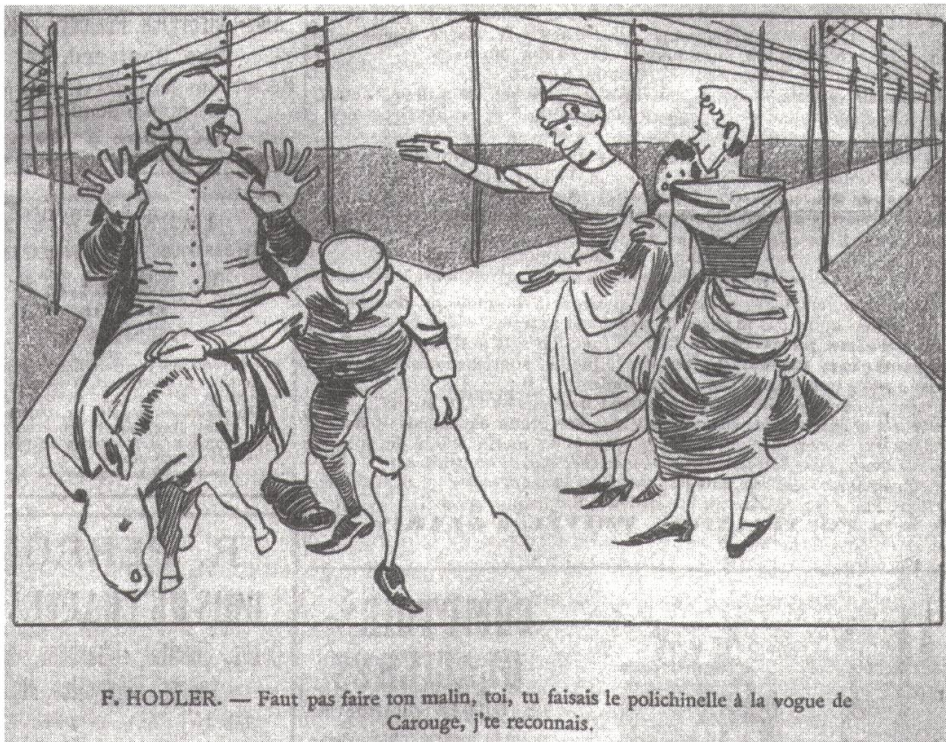
Swiss possessed a truly original character, one that should be reflected in their art.¹³ This was the same year in which Julius Langbehn published his *Rembrandt as Educator*, giving full fervour to the concept of *Heimatkunst* and establishing art as a key translator of the ‘blood-and-soil’ notions equating healthy folk morals with the future of the nation.¹⁴ Six years later, when Geneva hosted the National Exhibition, Trachsel wrote a more detailed treatise outlining his proposed ideal of Swiss art. Here, he identified three characteristics of Swiss nationality: intellectual, moral, and psychological, which in the Swiss are combined into a people who are analytic but also capable of synthesis, who are logical, with a ‘spirit of order’, who are independent, with energy in battle. And while simple and honest, the Swiss are, according to Trachsel, also able to use the imagination to achieve ‘visions nourished by nature, or cosmic visions’. Trachsel, who deplored the current trend of Swiss art students creating an ‘exodus to foreign schools’, suggests that these characteristics of true Swiss should translate into an equally strong, orderly, visionary, and independent style.¹⁵ It is not accidental that Trachsel’s characteristics of a national Swiss style also describe fairly well the new style that Hodler would develop during the latter years of the 1890s, so visible in his *Wilhelm Tell* of 1897 (fig. 4) and that is the mature style for which he is most well known today.



5 *Miller, his Son, and Donkey*, 1882, oil on canvas, 39 x 61 cm, Kunsthau Zurich

I have elsewhere related this new symbolism to a popular acceptance of the tourist-driven imagery of Switzerland.¹⁶ As the ‘playground of the world’, Swiss villages with easily-accessible experiences of Swiss people (in traditional dress, of course), Swiss mountains, and even Swiss cows were highly popular with Swiss and non-Swiss alike. The fact that the first exhibition-based Swiss village in Geneva in 1896 broke all attendance records, mostly with enthusiastic Swiss attendance, and was reprised to even greater acclaim at the Paris World’s Fair of 1900 attests to this popularity. It also explains the popularity of Albert Anker’s polished and pretty images of Swiss rural and farm inhabitants, who compete with the rough and coarse images that Hodler was still painting for that same 1896 Geneva Swiss Fair.

The ‘tourist national image’ also offers a frame for considering Hodler’s deliberately rural subjects. Hodler was living in an increasingly cosmopolitan Geneva, which was undergoing major transformations to its water system and streets, with incoming electricity and other modern utilities; in Geneva, a bastion of Swiss conservatism, this caused considerable concern that touched Hodler in many personal and ideological ways. Even as the ‘invasion’ of modern technology was often seen in Geneva as problematic, such as the caricature (fig. 6) using



6 Caricature of Hodler's *Miller, his Son, and Donkey*, in: *Carillon de Saint-Gervais*, 26.1.1889, p. 3

Hodler's *Miller, his Son, and Donkey* (fig. 5) as a reminder of how much rural Switzerland has actually changed, many of Hodler's friends joined in protests against new Alpine railways that were being built to carry tourists to the once isolated, untouched mountains. Albert Trachsel, proposer of a new national Swiss art, was intimately involved in these protests and for Trachsel, as for Hodler, the three issues – Swiss nationalism, Swiss art, and Swiss ruralism – were inextricably connected. Thus Hodler never painted, as most of his Symbolist colleagues did, city scenes, nor did he even include references to city issues in his work. Instead, he painted increasingly iconic views of Swiss nature with fewer and fewer people, only populating that nature with overtly symbolic figures.

If we return to the issue of international expectations of a national style, it is notable that at the earliest World's Fairs of 1851, 1855 and 1867 (where it had been first observed that there was 'no Swiss style' in art), choices were made to present Switzerland as the European hub of watchmaking and mechanical industry. The Swiss display at the 1855 Fair was, for example, ingeniously presented: a number of different watches, clocks, and other delicate instruments were positioned in such a way that they formed the shape of a large instrument. But for the World's Fair of 1900, the display of the Swiss instrument industry was relegated to a small

part of the huge farm chalet that was the official pavilion and, as we have seen, its effect was overwhelmed by that of the entire Swiss village located in the 'Entertainment' section of the Fair.

The twentieth-century work of Hodler therefore reflects the complexity of attitudes towards Swiss nationalism as well as international perceptions of nationalistic art that had come together at a formative time for Hodler in the 1890s. At work on panels for the 1896 Swiss National Exhibition, held for the first time in Geneva, Hodler was at the centre of all of the conflicting ideas about nationalism arising from the new emphasis on centralized government and its new federal art programme, at the very time when plans for the 1900 World's Fair were establishing increased expectations of competitive nationalistic expressions in everything, including art.

Thus in Hodler's twentieth-century work, when he was recognized both nationally and internationally as the Swiss 'Painter of the Nation', we find all the elements of an early modern, bold and abstracted style. We do not find, however, the anxious images of urban life, with its dangerously 'modern' women and violent, agitated men, so commonly depicted in this modern style; nor do we find the escapist fantasies that were simultaneously being evoked by Hodler's modernist peers. Instead, in his mature work Hodler speaks as an optimistic Swiss, of fearless men and strong, timeless women who stride through an unindustrialized, unurbanized, untouched Alpine world. Hodler's art, a unique blend of pan-European influences and singular Swiss identity, is therefore all the more inviting and instructive today.

1 Martigny 1991, Hirsh 1994.

2 1892/3, Oil and tempera on canvas, 100 x 130 cm, Neuchâtel, Musée d'art et d'histoire; Bättschmann/Müller 2008, vol. 1-1, cat. 244, p. 222.

3 Hirsh 1994.

4 Hirsh 1994, Hirsh 2001.

5 Loosli, 1921-1924, vol. 4, pp. 333-334.

6 Brunner 1978, p. 265.

7 Hirsh 1994.

8 Tomlinson 2003.

9 See Anderson 1983.

10 Facos/Hirsh 2003, pp. 254-256.

11 Hunziker 1970.

12 Hirsh 1994, note 77.

13 Trachsel 1890.

14 Langbehn 1890.

15 Trachsel 1896.

16 Hirsh 1994 and Facos/Hirsh 2003.