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## Documentation level



## Name

**Manuel, Niklaus (Niclaus) (I.)**

## Other version/s of name

Alamand, Niklaus Manuel (I.)

Alamann, Niklaus Manuel (I.)

Alleman, Niclaus (I.)

Alleman, Niklaus Manuel (I.)

Deutsch, Niklaus Manuel (I.)

Manuell, Niclaus (I.)

Manuel-Deutsch, Niklaus (I.)

Uelenman, Niklaus (I.)

## Dates of birth and death

\* um 1484 Bern, † 28.4.1530 Bern

## Municipality of origin (CH)

Bern

## Nationality

CH

## Brief biography

Maler, Zeichner, Dichter, Staatsmann. Freie Zeichnungen und Risse für Skulptur, Architektur, Glasgemälde, Holzschnitt, Scheibenriss sowie Fass-, Tafel-, Tüchlein- und Wandmalerei

## Fields of activity

Malerei, Zeichnung, Holzschnitt, Malerei, Glasmalerei, Wandmalerei

## Lexicon article

His maternal grandfather was the town clerk Thüring Fricker (author of the *Twingherrenstreit*, donor of the *All Souls Altarpiece* in Berne Cathedral). His mother was Margaretha Fricker, his father probably the apothecary Emanuel Alleman, or De Alemanis, from Chieri in Piedmont. Manuel's year of birth, 1484, cannot be regarded as certain. His surviving works can be dated from shortly after the middle of the first decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century; these are either designs for stained glass windows or drawings whose compositions were modelled on those used in glass painting. The first work, a single pane with the monogram "ND-M" in the church in Kirchberg (Canton of Berne) dating from 1508, can be linked to an artistic programme commissioned by a benefactor or benefactors that can be traced historically to the Benedictine Abbey in Selz, Alsace, the original owner of Kirchberg. In artistic terms, it reveals knowledge of and even recalls the style of Hans Baldung Grien. The unique *Riss zu*

*einem Lettner im Berner Münster* (Design for a rood screen in Berne Cathedral, Berne, Bernisches Historisches Museum) includes figures that can be attributed to Manuel and are based on those of the main portal by [Erhart Küng](#), master builder and sculptor of Berne Cathedral, who probably died in 1506. Subsequent drawings are reminiscent of [Urs Graf](#), who worked mainly in Basel. This is also an indication that, in artistic terms, Manuel looked to Basel and the Upper Rhine.

In 1509, he married Katharina Frischung, daughter of a respected burgher of Berne. Manuel wrote the name "Niclaus Alleman" in the marriage contract, although later, until his death, the name "Niclaus Manuel" features almost exclusively in documents. The monogram "NMD," combined with a dagger, first appears in its familiar form in drawings that can be dated from 1510, most of them exploring the portrayal and criticism of the figures of the mercenary and the prostitute. The assertion quoted for the first time in 1573 in Johann Fischaerts *Accuratae effigies pontificum maximorum [...]* that the "D" should be interpreted as "Deutsch" (German, translation of "Alleman") was questioned in 1941 by Max Grütter, who read the "D" as "Degen" (dagger). He discovered that the evolution of the form of the dagger in Manuel's monogram echoed the evolving shape of the dagger typically used by the Swiss Confederates, and is thus an important dating tool. Until 1520, Manuel's monogram, which consists almost without exception of a dagger and the initials "NMD" (with the occasional addition of "VB", von Bern, "from Berne") is invested with increasing graphic importance and value in its own right. From 1515, Manuel added an often tortuously convoluted lanyard.

He is first documented as a painter in 1513: he received remuneration for painting a banner pole and copying the *Julius Banner* (Berne, Bernisches Historisches Museum) presented to Berne by the Pope in 1512. The first works that are both signed and dated are the panels for the *St. Anne Altarpiece* in Berne's *Predigerkirche* (Preachers' Church) (Kunstmuseum Bern) of 1515. Besides several master drawings, the cloth painting *Pyramus and Thisbe* (Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum) and an altar panel with a *Battle Scene* and the *Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (Kunstmuseum Bern) are marked with a more antiquated form of the monogram and can thus be dated prior to 1515. For stylistic reasons, it can also be said that the cloth painting *Votive Image of St. Anna Selbdritt* was created before 1515, while the *Judgement of Paris* (both Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum) was probably Manuel's last cloth painting. The *Vinzenzen Carpets* (Berne, Bernisches Historisches Museum), created for Berne Cathedral and of which parts were possibly based on designs by Manuel, also bear the date "1515." The monogram on a

*Portrait of a Man* (Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kupferstichkabinett) resembles the one seen on the panels of the *St. Anne Altarpiece*, and hence indicates that it was also painted in about 1515.

In 1516, Manuel probably took part in a campaign in Northern Italy. His first child, Margaretha, was born the same year, followed by Hieronymus in 1520, Magdalena in 1524, [Hans Rudolf](#), the future painter and poet, in 1525, and [Niklaus](#) in 1528. In 1517, the choir vault of Berne Cathedral was painted under Manuel's direction; the small-scale cabinet pieces depicting *Bathsheba at her Bath* and *Lucretia* (Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum) carry the same date. There is archival evidence in Fribourg and Berne of Manuel's work for an altarpiece in Grandson. The two altar panels depicting *Saints Achatius and Barbara* and the *Martyrdom of the Theban Legion* (Kunstmuseum Bern) are possibly based on the Grandson altarpiece.

The woodcuts portraying the *Wise and Foolish Virgins*, a panel depicting the *Crucifixion of Christ* (Church of Usson, *département* of Puy-de-Dôme, France) and the mural *The Idolatry of Solomon* (which have survived only as copies) on a house on Münsterplatz, Berne, are all dated 1518. As Manuel's first artistic work, the mural shows unequivocal signs of his future reformatory stance. It can be assumed that the *Dance of Death*, which extends over more than 100 metres along the wall of the churchyard of the Predigerkloster monastery in Berne, was executed at the same time and completed in about 1519–1520. This work survives only as copies by [Albrecht Kauw](#) (Berne, Bernisches Historisches Museum) and presumably after Kauw by [Wilhelm Stettler](#) (Kunstmuseum Bern), as well as drawings by [Conrad Meyer](#) (Kunsthaus Zürich). There is evidence that work on the panels completed in 1520 for the *St. Anthony Altarpiece* (Kunstmuseum Bern) in Berne's *Antonius-Kirche* (Church of St. Anthony) can be dated to the same period. This accumulation of works, some of which were very laborious to create, and the so-called *Schreibbüchlein* (writing booklets) – templates for figures and ornaments (Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kupferstichkabinett) – completed during the same period, show that Manuel had by now probably set up a workshop and employed assistants. The panels presumably created for the High Altar of the *Predigerkirche* in Berne (Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum; Kunstmuseum Bern; Kunsthaus Zürich), panels that have survived in the Church of Vuillafans (*département* of Doubs, France), as well as stained glass designs for churches, including Lauperswil, can be partially attributed to Manuel's employees. With the *St. Anthony Panels* and two portraits, also dated 1520, painted on parchment, one of which is a *Self-portrait* (Kunstmuseum Bern), Manuel's activity as a painter seems to have come to an end. On the basis of several important works, he can be documented as a draughtsman until 1529.

In about 1520, Manuel's aim in life changed. The artist became a poet, official and politician, and committed himself to the renewal of faith. In 1522, he took part in a campaign in Northern Italy for the last time. Due to a lack of opportunities to earn his living with art, he applied for a position in the Bernese government. In 1523, he became *Landvogt* (bailiff) of Erlach, leaving the post only in 1528 in order to take his seat in the *Kleiner Rat* (Small Council), Berne's highest authority. He voiced his concerns on several occasions. From

the very beginning, banners with abbreviations of proverbs and figures of speech had appeared in many of his drawings; to date, only some have been deciphered. Manuel's earliest poetical work is probably his verses on the *Dance of Death*. After 1520, he mainly wrote Shrovetide plays with political and reformatory content. After the *Bicocca Song*, a battle song against the "Landsknechte," "hereditary enemies" of the Swiss Confederates, Manuel wrote the Shrovetide play *Vom Papst und seiner Priesterschaft* (Of the Pope and his Clergy) in 1523, and at about the same time *Von Papsts und Christi Gegensatz* (Of the Contradiction between the Pope and Christ). These were followed in 1525 by *Der Ablasskrämer* (The Indulgence Seller – with the only illustrative drawing in the author's own hand, Burgerbibliothek Bern), by *Ecks und Fabers Badenfahrt* (Eck's and Faber's Baden Fair) and *Barbali* in 1526, and finally in 1528 by *Krankheit der Messe* (Sickness of the Mass) and *Das Testament der Messe* (The Testament of the Mass). The last two years of Manuel's life were filled with political and reformatory activity.

Together with [Urs Graf](#) and [Hans Leu the Younger](#), Manuel belongs, in artistic terms, to the first generation of free artists in Switzerland. With them, he stands as an outsider in the context of the art of the Upper Rhine shaped by [Albrecht Dürer](#) and identified as such by Hans Baldung (1484–1545) and Matthias Grünewald (circa 1480–1528). His oeuvre is characterised by its originality and extraordinary graphic quality. His drawings include sketches and drafts, but above all independent master drawings, often on paper primed with colour. Manuel's work is characterised by a surprising variety of techniques: pen, charcoal, chalk, brushwork. Analyses conducted by Emil Bosshard using infrared spectrography have revealed the importance of underpaintings (sinopie) with regard to the execution of Manuel's paintings. His preoccupation with the space and colours of the landscape, astonishing for Swiss art of the period, is reminiscent of similar trends evident in the Donau School and the work of Grünewald.

Fundamental themes and preoccupations: late-mediaeval belief in miracles (alchemy), early criticism of moral decline in the Swiss Confederation (mercenaries, "the power of women"), criticism of the Church (abuse of power by the Pope, the sale of indulgences), the restitution of morals in society (church and state). Besides [Urs Graf](#), Manuel created the most powerful image of the Swiss Confederates of the Marignano period: passion, beauty, pride, defiance of death, arrogance, corruptibility, venality, lust and misery indicate the character of man, while beauty, sensuality, the art of seduction, rapacity, but also pride and self-sacrifice that of woman, who as a force of destiny frequently holds sway over man. The historian Franz Bächtiger has proven that Manuel, like [Urs Graf](#), makes a clear distinction between the vertical cross that characterises the Swiss Confederates and the cross of St. Andrew of their "hereditary enemies" on the battlefield, the "Landsknechte," thus providing us with important evidence of the Swiss Confederates' (and their female companions') clothing, weaponry and systems of combat. The group of letters "NKAW," which appears in various contexts, can be interpreted as "Nieman kans als wüssen" (Nobody can know) – a sort of evocation of Fortuna, the goddess of destiny, who also determines the course of love affairs, which are often ill-fated.

At an early stage of his career and several years before the

Reformation, Manuel was already exploring the theme of the *Wise and Foolish Virgins*, employing it to criticise society and the Church, whose representatives he accused of personal vanity. In several self-portrayals – as the divine painter (St. Luke) in the *St. Anne Altarpiece*, a mercenary in the *Self-portrait*, a vicariously suffering “assistant” in the *Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (all Kunstmuseum Bern), victim of the *Harlot Flying over the Land as a Witch* (drawing, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kupferstichkabinett) and death (*Dance of Death*) – Manuel involves himself directly in the society he portrays. Small, illustrative woodcuts, which can be dated to about 1520 and were used several times during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, show figurines related to the themes of the Shrovetide plays.

The landscapes on parts of the altar panels and the cloth paintings are reminiscent of Swiss lakes in the foothills of the Alps or the Jura mountains, but cannot be conclusively located. The likeliest inspiration for the background of the *Votive Image of St. Anna Selbdritt* (Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum) is the view from the *Hertensteinhaus* in Lucerne towards the *Hofkirche* church and Mount Rigi. The climax and conclusion of Manuel’s landscape painting is the seductive harmony of colours in the background of the *Temptation of St. Anthony* (Kunstmuseum Bern).

The three cloth paintings – collected, besides other paintings and a large proportion of Manuel’s drawings, by Basilius Amerbach, and now preserved at the Kunstmuseum Basel – are a unique ensemble among the holdings that have survived from the Dürer period. Their original purpose has not yet been established. Most of the surviving altar panels are in the Kunstmuseum Bern (some as deposita of the Gottfried Keller Foundation).

Works: Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum and Kupferstichkabinett; Kunstmuseum Bern; Berne, Bernisches Historisches Museum; Kirchberg, church; Lauperswil, church; Usson (Puy-de-Dôme), church; Kunsthaus Zürich.

Hans Christoph von Tavel, 1998, updated 2011  
Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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### Website

<http://www.niklaus-manuel.ch>

### Archive

Das Institut arbeitet zur Zeit am «Oeuvrekatalog Niklaus Manuel». Es werden deshalb nicht alle Datenbestände im Netz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Informationen zum Projekt finden Sie auf der Website des Instituts.

### Direct link

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### Last modification

09.08.2018

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AutorIn: Titel [Datum der Publikation], Quellenangabe, <URL>, Datum des Zugriffs. Beispiel: Oskar Bächtli: Hodler, Ferdinand [2008, 2011], in: SIKART Lexikon zur Kunst in der Schweiz, <http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4000055>, Zugriff vom 13.9.2012.