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Vallotton, Félix Edouard, *L'enlèvement d'Europe*, 1908, huile sur toile, 130 x 162 cm, Kunstmuseum Bern, G 1625, seit 1946

Documentation level



Name

Vallotton, Félix Edouard

Dates of birth and death

* 28.12.1865 Lausanne, † 29.12.1925 Neuilly

Municipality of origin (CH)

Vallorbe (VD)

Nationality

CH, F

Brief biography

Peintre, graveur, illustrateur et écrivain naturalisé Français en 1900. Membre du groupe des nabis et membre fondateur du *Salon d'Automne* à Paris

Fields of activity

peinture, dessin, gravure, xylographie, illustration

Lexicon article

Félix Vallotton was born into a Vaud family who had settled in Vallorbe in the early fifteenth century. At the age of 16 he went to Paris and was admitted to the Académie Julian, where he trained in the studios of Gustave Boulanger and Jules Lefebvre. In 1885 he exhibited for the first time at the *Salon des Artistes français* and began his *Livre de raison*, a chronological record of his works which he kept up until he died. Apart from showing regularly at the Salon, he contributed to exhibitions in towns and cantons across French-speaking Switzerland and also to Switzerland's first *National Art Exhibition* held in Bern in 1890. In 1891 he featured for the first time at the Paris *Salon des Indépendants*. That autumn he took up wood engraving. His renewal of this ancient technique proved a sensation at the first *Salon de la Rose+Croix* and established his reputation both in France

and abroad. Teaming up with Les Nabis in 1893, he exhibited with them at the gallery Le Barc de Boutteville and was soon drawn into artistic, literary and political circles in the French capital.

May 1899 brought a major turning-point in his life: he parted from his companion Hélène Chatenay and married Gabrielle Rodrigues-Henriques née Bernheim, the daughter of a wealthy art dealer in the French capital. In 1900 he became a French citizen and henceforth he dedicated his life mainly to painting, dividing his time between Paris, Normandy in summer, exploring other regions of France and visiting his family in Switzerland. He often travelled to Italy and also visited Germany (1911) and Russia (1913). From 1920 onwards he spent his winters at Cagnes near the Mediterranean coast. While continuing to show at the two big annual events, the *Salon des Indépendants* and *Salon d'Automne*, he exhibited at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery and also from 1910 at Druet's. He is listed in the *Secession* catalogues: in Berlin (where he became a corresponding member in 1901), Vienna (1903) and Munich. Other venues include Moscow (*La Toison d'Or*, 1908), London (*Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, 1910) and the *Armory Show* (United States, 1913). In Switzerland he was given a solo exhibition at the Künstlerhaus in Zurich in 1909 and participated in the *National Exposition* in Bern in 1914. His works were marketed by his brother Paul from Bernheim-Jeune's new outlet in Lausanne, which opened in 1913, and in German-speaking Switzerland primarily by his friends in Winterthur, the collectors Hedy and Arthur Hahnloser.

By the time war broke out, Vallotton's reputation was well established. The hostilities badly damaged his career and triggered bouts of depression but were also the source of new ideas. When peace was restored, there was another flurry of interest in his art, but it was brief. He was suffering from cancer and on the day after his sixtieth birthday he succumbed to the effects of surgery. He left behind more than 1700 paintings, hundreds of drawings, about 200 woodcuts and also a sizeable body of writing: art reviews, essays, stage plays and three novels.

Vallotton's singularity owes much to his roots in two different cultures, which he himself characterised as Germanic speculation and French clarity. Although he tussled with this dualism and saw it as a source of uncertainty, it is echoed in the list of masters who influenced him most: Lucas Cranach the Elder, , [Albrecht Dürer](#) and [Arnold Böcklin](#) on the one hand; Nicolas Poussin, the Le Nain brothers, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes on the other.

His œuvre breaks down into four periods: his young years (1880–1892), the Nabi phase (1893–1900), a transition stage

(1901–1908) and his mature period (1909–1925). Most of his paintings were done in oil with sparse, even brushwork on canvases of standard size. On the back of many of these he wrote Do not varnish, as he disapproved of the procedure. Until 1906 he frequently worked on card or wood panels. Between 1892 and 1900 some works were painted in glue-size tempera or a mix of tempera and pastel.

The young Vallotton had a preference for portraits, and the earlier ones reflect his admiration for Holbein. A humble but meticulous observer, he remorselessly recreates everylast detail of what he can see, even when painting close friends and family or himself (*Les parents de l'artiste*, 1886). While praising his honesty and sincerity, critics often found his portraits dry and mournful in hue. But his palette brightened during the 1890s and he painted some of his friends Nabi-fashion with patches of lively colour (*Misia à sa coiffeuse*, 1898). The synthetism expressed in a series of decorative portraits, including *Fedor Dostoïevski* (1901) and *Paul Verlaine* (1902), owes much to his succinct Indian ink masks of the previous decade, which were often printed in magazines. As for the solid shape of *Gertrude Stein* (1907), his contemporaries immediately identified the silhouette of the famous *Monsieur Bertin* (1832) by Ingres, Vallotton's mentor *par excellence*. From 1910, his quest for verisimilitude shifted from portraits in the narrow sense to simili-portraits of anonymous models and still life. There is an infinite variety to these, oscillating between sobriety (*Poivrons rouges*, 1915), exuberance (*Capucines, fond violet*, 1919) and monumentality (*Dame-jeanne et caisse*, 1925). Often ambiguous in meaning, they derive their powerful decorative impact from a combination of original angles and vivid, at times discordant colours.

In the 1890s, Vallotton's painting was overshadowed by his prints, which reveal him to be an ironic, critical and sometimes bitter observer of contemporary society. Working with the grain like Japanese masters of the woodcut, he invented a style that resonated well with the aesthetic aspirations of Les Nabis, exploiting the suggestive power of line, contour, flat surface and unexpected framing. Abrupt juxtapositions of black and white set up eloquent images that denounce injustice by those with power (*La manifestation*, 1893), challenge gender conflict (*Intimités*, 1898), conjure up the little absurdities of everyday life (*Le coup de vent*, 1894) or deploy the erotic symbolism of the *fin-de-siècle* (*L'alerte*, 1895; *La paresse*, 1896). His prints sold far and wide: they were hung in European capitals and reproduced in many publications. In this way they came to influence artists such as Aubrey Beardsley, Edward Munch and . Soon similar motifs from daily life found their way into his paintings too (*Le Bon Marché*, 1898; *Scène de rue à Paris*, around 1897; *Le bain à Etretat*, 1899).

Interiors remained a theme in his paintings for about fifteen years. *La Malade* (1892), reminiscent of [Albert Anker](#) and the Dutch masters of the seventeenth century, is the crowning glory of Vallotton's early period, and its virtuoso depiction of minute details is a *tour de force*. The painted interiors derived from his *Intimités* reveal a radical clash between aesthetic and mood: smooth surfaces of matt and violent colour, everyday objects charged with symbolic meaning, shadows cast like barriers between the characters all contribute to the heavy atmosphere in these pictorial comments on middle-class lifestyle (*La chambre rouge*,

1898; *Intérieur fauteuil rouge et figures*, 1899). In 1900, following his marriage into bourgeois circles, his new domestic environment with its luxury furniture and long suites of rooms, animated by his wife, prompted Vallotton to move away from those flat Nabi-style representations and to seek a reconciliation with space and volume (*Intérieur avec femme en rouge de dos*, 1903).

Women are a constant presence in his work, from the *Petit trottin juponné et chapeauté* of 1895 to the more stylised nudes of his later years, not to mention the epic scenes from mythology (*L'enlèvement d'Europe*, 1908). His resolve to unlock the mysteries of the being he called that terrifying associate begins with *Bain au soir d'été*, 1892–93, which caused a scandal in its day and marks his arrival in modernism. Ingres is his teacher for some motifs (*Le bain turc*, 1907), especially in the way he locks form with line. But under Vallotton's brush the femininity idealised by his predecessor from Montauban gives way to a contemporary woman from down the road. The eroticism of his nudes does not exude from glistening flesh but is expressed in the arabesque of an attitude (*Nu à l'écharpe verte*, 1914), an inviting look (*Femme nue couchée sur un drap blanc*, 1904) or a symbolic attribute (*Femme au perroquet*, 1909–1913). Around 1910 his reputation rested squarely on his nudes. While reviewers were in two minds, collectors adored them: the first Vallotton purchased by Mr and Mrs Hahnloser was a nude, and in 1905 Gertrude Stein's brother had already snapped up *Femme nue couchée sur un drap blanc*, 1904.

From 1909 the mature œuvre increasingly featured *paysage composé*, those invented landscapes that he first produced around the turn of the century. On a quest for painting free of literal respect for nature, a return to the celebrated 'historical landscape' of Poussin, Vallotton replaced the live studies of his youth with little pencilled outlines in his sketchbook. Back in the studio he would reconstruct the landscape on a canvas by referring to his notes, varying his techniques (honed by his Nabi experience) to suit the format and the theme. He combined disparate perspectives, lined up bands of unequal width and harshly contrasting colours, or framed the composition in silhouettes as foils; he united shapes with all-embracing contours, reinforced the antithesis of light and shade, married surfaces with volumes, toned down atmospheric density or applied unnatural colours to compose fantastical landscapes, caught in a dream-like, melancholy world where time has no hold and where people are usually absent (*Coucher de soleil, Villerville*, 1917; *La Dordogne à Carennac*, 1925).

I fear that I am destined for posthumous glory Vallotton noted in his *Journal* in 1919. This self-mockery seems to have been prophetic given his recognition today. The catalogue raisonné in three volumes *Félix Vallotton. L'œuvre peint*, published in 2005, doubtless played its part, for it offered an overview of the richness and diversity of his output, of which only a fraction was widely known. A proliferation of personal shows in Switzerland, France, Germany and the United States from the 1990 onwards helped to seal his fame, which further grew with the success of the retrospective *Félix Vallotton: Fire Beneath the Ice*, mounted in Paris, Amsterdam and Tokyo in 2013–14. In fact, it is now rare not to find at least one of his paintings in shows devoted to his Nabi friends or their era.

Works: The Baltimore Museum of Art; Dallas, The Barrett Swiss Art Collection; Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire; Lausanne, Musée cantonal des beaux-arts; Paris, Musée d'Orsay; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art; St Petersburg, Hermitage Museum; Kunstmuseum Winterthur; Kunsthaus Zürich.

Marina Ducrey, 1998, updated 2015
Translation: Katherine Vanovich

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Website

<https://www.sik-isea.ch/fr-ch/Recherche-publications/Recherche/Projets-de-recherche/Vallotton-illustrateur-Catalogue-raisonné>

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