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Wölfli, Adolf, *Regalo di pallohne*, 1926, Bleistift und Farbstift auf Papier, 51 x 68 cm (Objektmass), Privatbesitz, [seit 2006]

Documentation level



Name

Wölfli, Adolf

Dates of birth and death

* 29.2.1864 Bowil, † 6.11.1930 Bern

Municipality of origin (CH)

Schangnau (BE)

Nationality

CH

Brief biography

Maler und Zeichner. Texte und musikalische Kompositionen. Vertreter der Art Brut. Lebte über 30 Jahre in der psychiatrischen Klinik Waldau in Bern

Fields of activity

Zeichnung, Malerei, Illustration, Collage

Lexicon article

Adolf Wölfli was born in poor circumstances, as the youngest of seven children. His father was a quarryman, his mother a laundress. After his father left the family, eight-year-old Wölfli was taken to his home village of Schangnau in 1872 with his sick mother, where his mother died and Wölfli's life of deprivation as a foster child began. From 1880 to 1890, he was a farmhand and labourer in Bern and the surrounding area. In 1883, he was admitted to the infantry recruit school in Lucerne, graduating in 1884. In 1890, he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for the attempted rape of two girls. After another rape attempt, he was committed to the Bern Cantonal Mental Asylum, Sanatorium and Nursing Home Waldau in 1895, where he was diagnosed with *dementia paranoides*. Wölfli would remain in Waldau, near Bern, until his death.

It was not until after the onset of his illness that Adolf Wölfli's œuvre was produced, during his stay in Waldau, which lasted over 30 years (1895–1930). From 1907 onwards, he was encouraged by Walter Morgenthaler, a doctor and psychiatrist who worked there. In 1921, Morgenthaler published the monograph *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler* (A Psychiatric Patient as Artist), which was groundbreaking in the fields of psychopathology and art. In the same year, upon publication of Morgenthaler's book, Wölfli's drawings were exhibited for the first time: in bookshops in Bern, Basel and Zurich.

Wölfli's drawn, literary and musical œuvre is fascinating – both for its diversity, as it interweaves writing, drawing, mathematics and music, and for its monumental scope. His œuvre comprises two parts: the *Einblatt-Zeichnungen* (single-sheet drawings: the 1904–1906 early pencil drawings and the 1916–1930 coloured drawings, also called 'bread-and-butter art') and his 1908–1930 narrative work (over 25,000 pages with prose, poems, musical compositions and illustrations).

The early pencil drawings from 1904–1906, of which just over 50 are known today, represent a self-contained group within his œuvre, the pictorial foundation on which Wölfli's art and his unmistakable vocabulary of forms developed. Wölfli called these early drawings pieces of music and signed them 'Componist' (Composer). These drawings are predominantly symmetrical in structure, showing symbolic and archetypal forms: circle, oval, egg, star, butterfly, cup.

His narrative work began in 1908 with an imaginary biography of Adolf Wölfli (1908–1912). As this biography extended into the mythical, a fantastical story of journeys and experiences in the universe developed (1912–1926). Subsequently, the narrative transitioned into extensive extolling and celebration of the new *Skt. Adolf-Schöpfung* (St Adolf Creation, 1917–1928). It ended with *Trauer-Marsch* (Funeral March, 1928–1930), a requiem-like finale defined by the strict rhythm of sequential words and numbers. From 1916 onwards, Wölfli signed his works 'Skt. Adolf II.' (St Adolf II).

Wölfli's written legacy comprises 45 large volumes with over 25,000 densely written pages, more than 1,600 illustrations and over 1,600 collages. Chronologically, his narrative work can be divided into five groups: *Von der Wiege bis zum Graab* (From the Cradle to the Grave, 1908–1912); *Geographische und allgebräusche Hefte* (Geographic and Algebraic Books, 1912–1916); *Hefte mit Liedern und Tänzen* (Books with Songs and Dances, 1917–1922); *Allbumm-Hefte mit Tänzen und Märschen* (Album Books with Dances and Marches, 1924–1928); and *Trauer-Marsch* (Funeral March, 1928–1930).

From the Cradle to the Grave is Wölfli's retelling of his life story in the form of a travelogue. In the depicted events, he himself is the hero, between the ages of two and eight. The child Doufi is accompanied on his journeys across various continents by his mother and an ever-growing group of friends and relatives, the 'travelling party of Swiss hunters and naturalists'. The subsequent Geographic and Algebraic Books describe the forming of the future, the coming St Adolf Creation. In the Books with Songs and Dances and the Album Books with Dances and Marches, Wölfli celebrates the coming world and his self-appointment as Adolf II in thousands of musical compositions. The closing Funeral March comprises sequences of sound structures rhyming with the vowels a, e, i, o and u, along with time signatures. This is almost exclusively illustrated with collages, in which Wölfli once again incorporates themes from his own world, as well as the outside world, in concentrated form. These include politics, family, luxury, progress, catastrophes, love, women, exotica and, above all, the many manifestations of advertising: As early as 1929, he used advertisements for Coca-Cola and Campbell's tomato soup in his Funeral March collages, thus anticipating the iconography of pop art (*Coca-Cola; Delicious Tomato Soup*).

The coloured single-sheet drawings produced between 1916 and 1930, Wölfli's so-called 'bread-and-butter art', were not created as illustrations of his writings, but exclusively for sale and on commission. Wölfli documented this in 'inventories', noting the titles, prices and owners.

Although Adolf Wölfli's work was initially traded as an insider tip, interest in his art picked up after the Second World War – in the context of fascination with the exotic, the outsiderish and Freud's theory of the unconscious. In 1948, French artist Jean Dubuffet founded *Compagnie de l'Art Brut* and created a new approach to art produced by outsiders. In the same year, Dubuffet dedicated one of his first exhibitions to Adolf Wölfli at Galerie René Drouin in Paris. Interest in art brut was mainly limited to psychiatry until the 1960s, when the art establishment also began to delve into non-verbal means of expression used by the mentally ill – and thus to question and expand the concept of art. In 1963, Harald Szeemann showed a selection of Wölfli's works in the exhibition *Bildnerie der Geisteskranken – Art Brut – insania pingens* at Kunsthalle Bern. In 1967, Dubuffet presented all of his Wölfli drawings in the overview exhibition *L'Art brut* at Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. In 1971, the Kupferstichkabinett (Department of Prints and Drawings) at Kunstmuseum Basel showed Wölfli drawings from a private collection, thus becoming the first art museum to honour a mentally ill artist with a solo exhibition. In 1972, at *Documenta 5* in Kassel, Harald Szeemann reconstructed the Waldau cell in which Wölfli had lived and worked, and positioned his œuvre in the context of international contemporary art. The year 1975 saw the founding of the Adolf Wölfli Foundation, based in Kunstmuseum Bern. Here, the first Wölfli overview exhibition was held in 1976, before touring fourteen European and American cities. In the 1987 Kunstmuseum Bern exhibition *Die Gleichzeitigkeit des Anderen*, works by [Paul Klee](#) and Adolf Wölfli were shown in the same room. Further presentations at Kunstmuseum Bern followed in 1992 and 2008. Wölfli's works were exhibited in Europe and the United States (Philadelphia in 1988, New York in 1988

and 2003, Berkeley in 1989).

Wölfli is considered one of the most prominent representatives of art brut and outsider art. His work continues to influence and inspire to this day, with artists such as [Meret Oppenheim](#), [Daniel Spoerri](#), [Jean Tinguely](#), [Franz Eggenschwiler](#) and [Bernhard Luginbühl](#) paying homage to him. The manifold interactions caused by Wölfli's works open up perspectives not only for research into art history, but also for psychopathology, literature and musicology.

Works: Aargauer Kunsthhaus Aarau; Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kupferstichkabinett (Department of Prints and Drawings); Bern, Waldau Museum, Psychiatric University Clinic; Kunstmuseum Bern, Adolf Wölfli Foundation; Lausanne, Collection de l'art brut; Kunstmuseum St. Gallen; Kunstmuseum Zug.

Elka Spoerri, 1998, updated 2012
Translation: Simon Thomas

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Website

<http://www.adolfwoelfli.ch>

Direct link

<http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4022971&lng=en>

Last modification

17.11.2020

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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.