

## Ferdinand Hodler

[Mr. C. A. Loosli is a well-known German-Swiss writer. In imaginative writing he achieved considerable distinction in his own country by his short stories in the Bernese dialect; during the war he wrote two most interesting contributions to the study of Switzerland's international position entitled respectively *Wir Schweizer und unsere Beziehungen zum Ausland* and *Ausländische Einflüsse in der Schweiz*. Latterly his best title to recognition has been his art-criticism, and in particular his authoritative exposition of the art of the greatest modern Swiss painter—Hodler, whose executor, so to speak, Mr. Loosli is. A serial publication on the genius and works of Hodler from Mr. Loosli's pen is now in progress in Switzerland.]

It is not easy to discuss the significance of Hodler's life and work before an audience who, in all probability, are not well acquainted with his art. Only his countrymen—and of them not the great mass, but the cultivated few—have a genuine opportunity of gauging his artistic importance and of valuing fairly his greatness.

Hodler was one of those rare individuals who make their appearance in art perhaps once in three centuries. To be sure that posterity shall not accuse us of blind undervaluation, we of his generation must set him on a par with Giotto, Leonardo da Vinci, Michael Angelo, or with Holbein, Dürer, Rembrandt, and Velasquez. For his work has the quality of grandeur that is of no epoch; it has the towering stature of something above place and nationality. He mirrors humanity, as did Dante and Shakespeare; he speaks across frontiers and alike to present and future.

Of working-class origin, Hodler was born on 14 March, 1853. His father was a consumptive joiner's assistant, his mother a young girl of the people. In 1858 she was left a widow, with four young children, and in bitter need. Before long she married again, a widower named Schüpbach, a house painter, with children of his own. The family struggled along in poverty until both parents died. At the age of fifteen Hodler was thus left an orphan. Already the instincts of the painter had been aroused by the beauties of Berne and its neighbourhood, while the lakes and mountains of Steffisburg, near Thun, whither his parents moved not long before their deaths, filled him with a burning desire to be an artist.

After his mother's death he became the pupil of the at that time very active painter, Ferdinand Sommer. Sommer's *atelier* fabricated rather than

painted, year in, year out, "souvenir" landscapes of the Bernese Oberland for wholesale distribution among the swarms of foreign visitors. Hodler left this picture-factory before his course of apprenticeship was completed. He had acquired some technical knowledge and he now attempted composition and completion of pictures on his own account. He lived for a while with his mother's brother Neukomm, who lived in Langenthal, a small market town in Bernese Oberaargau. Such works of his of this period as survive show an unusual breadth of conception and an earnestness not common among productions of nineteen-year-old boys, but they give no hint of the future greatness that lay in store for the artist. The pictures which occur to me in this connection are: *Schüler* (a portrait of his brother August), *Schuster in Seiner Werkstätte*, and a few landscapes.

It was not long before the young Hodler felt that he lacked scope and opportunity for perfecting his knowledge. Langenthal, the tiny country town, was too narrow a stage for him and he determined to go to Geneva, and there, within the orbit of Alexander Calame and François Diday, at that time the acknowledged leaders of Swiss landscape painting both at home and abroad, to complete his training. Without money or friends, he had a hard time to keep his end in view, but by ceaseless toil at reading, by attending high school classes and by working in the Public Art Gallery (Musée Rath), he contrived to study and to perfect his knowledge. From this period date *Der Student* and *Der Maler*, not only remarkably precocious works for so young a man, but perhaps containing some foretaste of what was to come.

It was about two years after his arrival in Geneva that Hodler attracted the notice of Barthélmy Menn, director of the Geneva School of Art. This man, without any great technical proficiency of his own or profound artistic knowledge, had a gift for teaching. Unlike many of his kind, he made no attempt to impress himself on his pupils but rather encouraged them, by supplying the proper tools at the proper time, to develop the best within themselves. He insisted only on one thing—absolute artistic integrity. He would tolerate nothing that showed carelessness of thought or execution, nothing that was clearly superficial or imitative. He based his teaching on accuracy of draughtsmanship and on genuine understanding of colour. Hodler, when he became one of Menn's pupils, was in consequence forced to observe and to express only himself. In later years he was never tired of expressing gratitude and respect for his teacher. "A boy who did not learn to draw from Menn, never learnt," he said. And he recognised that, thanks to the old man's rigorous methods, he was, under that tutelage, compelled to throw overboard all the secondhand mannerisms that he had acquired, and to start afresh.

It was during his time under Menn that the young Hodler first devoted himself to the artistic theories of the great painters of the past. He read and absorbed Leonardo's and Dürer's writings. These studies, allied with his own keen observation, showed him that, under the endless variety of their external appearances, humanity and nature are constant and consistent, following the unalterable laws of Nature herself. No one of us can experi-

ence any emotion or conceive any idea that has not previously been experienced or conceived. The wonder of eternal sameness and yet of eternal renewal filled his heart.

He remarked how much greater were the similarities than the differences throughout the history of man and nature. Observing that identical causes have always produced identical results, he convinced himself that at all times, and as much in art as in life, the essential elements followed one unchanging rule. Human society is only possible because men have the same needs, the same sorrows, the same joys and, ultimately, the same end. And the truth applies equally to law, to government, and to art. The following sayings illustrate Hodler's application of this sense of eternal unity :—

Tolstoi says that no one leaf on a tree exactly resembles another one. It is, however, undeniable that nothing so much resembles one plane-leaf as another plane-leaf.

Again :—

Confronted with a crowd of beings of some race wholly strange to us, we find it hard at first to distinguish one individual from another. But we have not the least doubt that they are *human* beings that stand before us, from which it is evident that the similarities that bind humanity together are infinitely stronger and greater than the divergencies that distinguish one race from another.

Hodler came only gradually to a full conviction of these principles, and during the period of his persuasion his paintings reveal the gradual tendency of his mind. He produced a number of figure pictures and landscapes at this time, of which the most important are *Das Turnerbankett* (1879); *Schwingerumzug*, with its Raphaelite composition; and such landscapes as *Jonction* and *Salève*.

Not until the end of 1880 was Hodler completely the master of this sense of the unity of natural law. He formulated his belief in the eternal renewal, symmetry and logic of nature, in what he called the "law of parallels," and to this self-imposed rule he subordinated all his work.

The pictures known as *Die Nacht*, *Die Lebensmüden*, *Die enttäuschten Seelen*, *Die Eurhythmie*, and *Der Tag*, all to-day in the Berne Art Gallery, were the first to be produced according to this law of parallels. In these works and in those which followed them,\* Hodler insists only on the *essence* of his subject. The basic emotions of humanity, washed clean of all fortuitous colouring, were to him the only phenomena worth an artist's notice, and accordingly his pictures are passionate syntheses of a wide range of fundamental experience. They were usually painted two or three times, so determined was the artist to express that inner spirit for which alone he sought. His figures are more than life size and impress the observer as indeed the work of a Titan.

\* Particularly *Der Blick ins Unendliche*; *Der Auserwählte*; *Der Jüngling vom Weibe bewundert*; *Die Empfindung*; *Der Frühling*; *Die heilige Stunde*; *Die Liebe*; *Der Aufbruch der Jenenserstudenten*; *Die Einstimmigkeit*; *Der Blick in die Ewigkeit*; and his historical pictures *Der Rückzug von Marignano*; *Die Schlacht bei Näfels*; and *Das Murtenerschlachtbild*.

The bodily strength of Hodler was as remarkable as the giant force of his mind. He worked unceasingly. Simultaneously with the production of his great master-canvases, he painted landscapes and portraits. That between 1870 and 19 May, 1918, the day of his death, he produced *finished easel pictures* of various sizes to the number of nearly four thousand is striking proof of his energy and fertility.

It would at this point be proper to dwell individually on a few of Hodler's principal pictures. But to a circle of readers who have no opportunity of seeing the originals, such procedure would be vain. It is something of a tragedy that England should know nothing of Hodler. To my knowledge there are only two or three of his paintings in the whole of Great Britain and they are in the Swiss Legation in London. About ten years ago, Mr. Harway, of Cambridge, published an article about Hodler, but beyond this nothing important has been written in praise or criticism of his work. These circumstances must be my excuse for dwelling in this article mainly on the significance to art and to humanity of the master's philosophy and work. Let me conclude by detailing briefly the events of his later life.

For about two years he remained as pupil to Barthélmy Menn, earning a livelihood as much by house decorating as by the sale of actual pictures. Towards the end of 1878 he travelled to Madrid, where he lived for a year studying the life of the people and absorbing the masterpieces of the Prado. Returning to Geneva, he began once more his struggle for existence, financially with little success, but gaining gradually a reputation. The belief in his genius held by his few artistic friends was for long powerless against the stubborn academism of general taste. As he became better known, the fury of the reactionaries increased against him. The very mention of his name was as a red rag to a bull. There were times when the anti-Hodler campaign was as vulgar and unscrupulous as a political quarrel. We Swiss must sorrowfully admit that it remained to foreigners first to recognise the genius of our greatest artist, and that appreciation from his own countrymen followed that of other nations.

Hodler's first exhibition success was in Paris at the end of the year 1880. Puvis de Chavannes had seen his work and acclaimed it. From that moment he went steadily forward in the estimation of those who knew, until the triumph of 1903, when, as a man of 50, he was the central figure of the important exhibition of the *Vienna Secession*. This event marked the beginning of his world-fame. Ever more widely he was recognised as one of the great artists of the age. Germany, Austria, and Switzerland showered honours upon him. He became honorary member of every artistic society; an honorary doctor of the Basel "Hochschule"; a free citizen of Geneva; an officer of the French Legion of Honour. When, finally, was held the magnificent retrospective exhibition at Zurich in 1917, Europe and Switzerland acclaimed Ferdinand Hodler as a master painter of all time.

Except for brief journeys abroad, Hodler did not quit Geneva after 1879. The tireless industry of his struggling youth intensified rather than relaxed. In the last three years of his life he fell a prey to hæmorrhage. For a time the disease was controlled by his iron will and subordinated to his fierce eagerness for work. But his life, so rich and full, came to a painless end on Easter Sunday of 1918. A calcified artery, become malignant through want of care, was the cause of his death. He died, as he had lived, thinking only of his work, a painter to the end.

C. A. LOOSLI.