

Book Reviews

Kunsttechnologische Forschungen zur Malerei von Ferdinand Hodler

Karoline Beltinger, editor; with Anna Stoll, Gabriele Englisch and Danièle Gros

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Reviewed by Iris Schaefer

This book is the first volume of the newly established KUNSTmaterial series of the Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA). The contents represent the most important results of research on the painting methods and materials of Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918), based on in-depth technical investigations of his works. Research on Hodler began at the Institute as early as its foundation in 1951, but the work presented in this book was undertaken as part of an ambitious multidisciplinary research project on the artist's oeuvre: 'Ferdinand Hodler: Catalogue raisonné of the paintings'. Begun in 1998 with generous funding from the Swiss national trust (Schweizerischer Nationalfond), the project has resulted not only in this book but also the first volume of the Hodler catalogue raisonné, dedicated to his landscape paintings, published by SIK-ISEA last year.

One of the best-known Swiss artists, Ferdinand Hodler is regarded as a Symbolist, but his style fluctuated widely throughout his career under the influences of realism, art nouveau and finally expressionism. His oeuvre consists of around 2000 paintings and thousands of drawings and sketches. According to the foreword to this book around 250 paintings were examined in the course of research by a team of art technologists led by Karoline Beltinger,

head of the department of art technology at SIK-ISEA. She and her three co-authors bring into view different topics in six essays, each ending with a useful summary in German and English.

The first meticulously elaborated essay by Karoline Beltinger addresses questions of format using statistical analysis as well as technical examination and written sources. Beginning in the mid-1880s, format became a major concern for Hodler: not only the height and width of a picture but, even more, the ideal relationship between the borders of a picture and the subject matter within it. Technical investigations show clearly that Hodler often resolved these problems while painting the pictures. Revisions of formats in his early works are assumed to have been done by Hodler in the 1890s when he was invited to contribute to many exhibitions. Findings are presented with the help of diagrams, case studies and tables. The tables are sometimes confusing, no doubt because of the immense body of data presented, and we have to admire the efforts undertaken to elucidate complex information.

Anna Stoll draws our attention to the corrections and revisions characteristic of Hodler's work, although it is known that he tried to avoid or minimize them. Approximately half of the 100 paintings examined by Stoll have corrections or revisions, which she groups in three

categories. The characteristics and chronological occurrence of each group can be helpful in connection with dating and authenticity questions. The most accurate dating is possible when revisions were carried out with oil colour sticks, specifically Raffaëlli Solid Oil Colours.

Gabriele Englisch reports on the creation of Hodler's last symbolic figurative composition, *View into Infinity*, which exists in five versions. Because of the use of diluted paints for initial outlines on unprimed canvases, reverses of the paintings show traces of the outlines. Comparisons between them lead to the conclusion that, for the most part, the five versions were painted at the same time instead of being executed consecutively. Although Hodler planned this composition with numerous sketches and drawings, significant compositional changes are part of the painting process.

A second essay by Beltinger focuses on the role of tracings in Hodler's workshop. Two categories could be distinguished within a huge number of tracings found in Hodler's estate. In the first category are preparatory sketches for the evolution of artistic ideas, forms and composition made using a 'Dürer window pane', on which the artist sketched the image of a model viewed through a hole in a piece of cardboard

as depicted in a Dürer woodcut. The fact that numerous tracings produced from the same source material are not identical leads to the conclusion that the tracing process also incorporated revisions. Many fewer tracings belong to the second category: full-sized tracings used for reproductions, multiple versions and variants. Two principal methods of transfer were found. The main method used up to 1904 seems to have been to draw an image on tracing paper, blacken its reverse, place the blackened side against a new support, and go back over the image. After that date, the artist preferred incising lines through tracing paper into still soft primer. This information will also be helpful in questions of authenticity and dating.

Danièle Gros investigated a pair of portraits of Louise-Delphine Duchosal in collections in Zurich and Winterthur. Up until now the chronology could not be solved, since the portraits have characteristics typical of both original and subsequent versions of the painting. Comparison of pentimenti and X-radiographs helped to identify the Zurich portrait as the later version.

In the last chapter, observations on Hodler's use of paint are presented in a third essay by Beltinger. She compares to written sources the results of analyses of binding media for about 85 paintings from across Hodler's working life. Hodler mainly made use of oil colours and only occasionally tempera, casein paints and oil colour sticks. The matt appearance of many paintings, often seen as evidence of tempera, is in fact caused by strongly absorbent grounds or supports. Pastel hues seem to be influenced by the presence of considerable amounts of

zinc white in the paint layers, but this interesting aspect is only touched on at the end of the essay.

All essays include excellent colour illustrations showing paintings under different lighting (normal, raking, transmitted and ultraviolet) as well as using a microscope, X-radiography and infrared reflectography. The layout for illustrations is good, as are their sizes. Considerable effort has been made to point out relevant information on photographs with marking lines, arrows or drawings and to create the extensive tables combining text and illustrations. Each contribution in this book can be seen as an entity and is well written. The technical findings are plausibly discussed and interpreted with extensive references to written and oral sources, including comments by Hodler himself. References to his contemporaries in Switzerland and abroad are inspiring and raise the need for more technical studies. One more merit of this publication is that it provides deep insights into Hodler's enormous investment in the preparation and evolution of his painting.

Unfortunately the book suffers from the lack of an introduction summarizing the present state of research on the artist, as well as the aims and criteria of technical investigations. While 250 paintings are said to have been examined, it is unclear why individual authors examined much smaller numbers of paintings. This book is addressed to professionals, but a short overview about Hodler's life and work would have been helpful. Moreover, the reader may be interested to know whether general information about Hodler's painting technique is already well-known

or at least published elsewhere. One might wonder about Hodler's use of cotton canvas and his methods of paint application, such as his use of a palette knife. His approach to varnishing would also be of interest, since we know little about his preference for wax-based coatings. In this context it should be mentioned that a forthcoming issue of *KUNSTmaterial* will be dedicated to Hodler's use of inorganic pigments, but this does not really help us understand the choice of topics here. Another point of criticism is the limitation of end matter to an alphabetical list of works examined. An index could have made the information in the text more accessible, and a bibliography would facilitate further research.

Nonetheless, this book is important for technical art historians, art historians, conservators and scientists with an interest in painting of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In regard to Hodler, it shows in a fascinating way how technical examinations can help clarify and reconstruct the creation and evolution of his paintings. As a consequence they assist in resolving questions of dating and authenticity. The potential that these results have for the Hodler catalogue raisonné is evident. One may wish that the multidisciplinary approach exhibited here at the internationally renowned SIK-ISEA will inspire other collaborations of technical art historians and art historians working on critical catalogues raisonnés.

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