

Wall texts 14th to 19th Century

Painting on Fabric—A Rarity in the Sixteenth Century (Room 1)

A process we take for granted today—painting on canvas—was a rarity at the beginning of the sixteenth century. To this day, there is no definitive explanation as to why some works from this period were created on materials other than the wooden panels common in European painting at the time. There are some plausible hypotheses, however: Paintings on canvas, like those in this room, were more lightweight and therefore easier to move. These were significant considerations in Hans Holbein the Younger's organ wings: Installed directly on the organ in Basel Minster at a height of eleven meters, they were intended to protect it from hazards, such as birds or bats, when it was not in use. As the organ wings would be opened when the instrument was being played, they were frequently repositioned.

A further theory is that paintings on fabric were intended to imitate precious tapestries. The works by Bernese artist Niklaus Manuel, depicting scenes from classical antiquity, suggest as much. They were created using the so-called Tüchlein technique, which involves watercolor applied to unprimed, exceptionally fine canvas. The people of Bern would have been exposed to valuable tapestries during the Burgundian Wars, when some of these textile artworks were seized as loot in 1476.

Konrad Witz—A Singular Figure (Room 2)

Konrad Witz was born just after 1400 in the city of Rottweil, located in present-day southern Germany. He trained as a painter at a time when the International Gothic style, also known as "Soft Style" and characterized by its graceful figures and gently flowing forms, dominated European art.

Witz broke with these conventions by lending his figures volume and mass, rendering them substantial, almost sculptural, with their garments draped in heavy, angular folds. He imbues the material world with an all but tangible quality where metal glints, velvet beckons to be touched, and spaces appear believable. Light and its effects, such as shadows and reflections, become an essential compositional tool in his work.

These novel approaches originated and thrived in Netherlandish painting of the early fifteenth century. Thus, Witz must have visited Ghent and Bruges and seen the work of his Dutch contemporaries before settling in Basel around 1435. Kunstmuseum Basel

holds the largest collection of artworks by this important innovator of Late Gothic art, including panels of his seminal Heilsspiegel Altarpiece.

Hans Holbein the Younger in Basel (Room 5)

In 1515, Hans Holbein the Younger moved to Basel together with his older brother, Ambrosius. There, they joined the studio of painter Hans Herbst and were soon accepted into the Basel craftsmen's guild, Zum Himmel. These early steps marked the beginning of a successful career.

Holbein the Younger worked for prominent patrons and moved in the humanist circles surrounding the scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam. One of the defining features of his art is his detailed depiction of reality and his portraits demonstrate remarkable skill in capturing the unique characteristics of individuals. This sensitivity to the human condition echoes the values of humanism, which increasingly focused on people in their earthly existence and as distinct beings. In its unflinching realism, Holbein's striking painting, *The Dead Christ in the Tomb*, powerfully embodies these ideals. His exceptional talent would eventually result in the artist achieving considerable success at the English royal court.

The Drawings of Hans Holbein the Younger (Room 7)

Alongside his paintings, Hans Holbein the Younger also produced an impressive body of drawings. Most of these works were not intended to stand alone as finished pieces but served as preparatory drawings or studies. Holbein the Younger frequently used pen and brush, allowing him to create striking contrasts of light and shadow that afforded his figures and architectural depictions a convincing spatiality. He employed colored chalks for his drawn portraits, lending them an impressive vividness. Even centuries later, these works are captivating due to their lifelike quality and immediacy.

Such works on paper are highly light-sensitive, which is why they are rarely exhibited and, when they are, only for limited periods. To enable their presentation here, the illumination in this room has been significantly reduced.

A Seventeenth Century Art Boom (Room 12)

The Netherlands of the seventeenth century produced more paintings than anywhere else in Europe at the time. This prolific artistic output was largely driven by the young republic's emergence as a maritime and trading power that thrived during European colonialism. The so-called Dutch Golden Age allowed merchants to accumulate wealth

gained in the exploitation of colonized territories. As the social status of merchants grew, they proudly displayed their prosperity through the acquisition of artworks.

In response to this overwhelming demand, artists began to specialize, focusing on specific genres of painting. Portraits, landscapes, and still lifes were considered inferior by art academies in the seventeenth century, who viewed them as mere depictions of the visible world. Despite this, these artworks were highly popular with buyers. History painting, on the other hand, merged fact and fiction in complex narratives and was valued as the highest form of artistic expression. Each of the following rooms is dedicated to one of these individual genres.

Art With a Mission (Room 21)

Emilie Linder embraced the ideals of the Nazarene movement—an early nineteenth-century group of painters that sought to restore spirituality and moral authority through their artworks and whom she had encountered in Munich and Rome. The Nazarenes rejected the indulgent style of the rococo as well as the detached elegance of classicism. Instead, they turned to Christian themes and aimed for a sober sincerity in their visual language.

Linder focused on religious subjects throughout her career. Thanks to her financial independence, she was largely shielded from the professional barriers many women artists faced at the time. As men increasingly saw women as competitors, female artists were often excluded from academies, exhibitions, and professional associations. Linder also built a substantial art collection and, beginning in 1841, started to donate it to her hometown of Basel in several installments. It included Late Gothic works originally acquired by her grandfather, Johann Konrad Dienast.

A “Patron Saint” of the Museum (Room 22)

Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin and his family experienced periods of financial hardship, hunger, and disease, such as typhoid and cholera; eight of his fourteen children died at an early age. Yet, Böcklin eventually achieved professional success. His enigmatic and evocative paintings, such as *Isle of the Dead*, resonated deeply with the spirit of the late nineteenth century. His final self-portrait, in which he proudly presents himself at the peak of his career, was commissioned for the art collection of Basel, where he was born. Today, the Kunstmuseum houses the most significant repository of his works.

Contemporary opinion on Böcklin was divided: some viewed him as a reactionary, others as prescient. Likewise, his interest in classical mythology was seen either as a reflection of nationalist convictions or as a sign of his engagement with universal, timeless themes.

His rejection of traditional academic ideals of physical beauty in favor of his own imagination seemed eccentric at the time but, from a present-day perspective, his work appears visionary.

Symbolic Scenes and Great Emotions (Room 24)

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, numerous artists sought to find compelling visual expressions for fundamental human experiences. Although the works commonly associated with symbolism differ in style, they share a key characteristic: they suggest something beyond what is literally shown. A landscape or a figure can thus become a metaphor for inner states or universal ideas.

Giovanni Segantini, for example, depicts a peasant woman and cows at a watering trough, set in a barren mountain landscape. Here, thirst and water—symbolizing the essence of life—connect human and animal existence. In Ferdinand Hodler's painting, a solitary, hunched figure embodies a feeling of despair, while Arnold Böcklin utilizes an image of a staircase to represent the ups and downs of life's journey from birth until death.

Travel, Perception, and the Changing World (Room 25)

Frank Buchser is considered one of the most stylistically versatile Swiss painters of his generation. Unlike many of his contemporaries who stayed within a single national or stylistic school, Buchser's works shift dramatically depending on where he worked and what he depicted. After training in France and Italy, he traveled extensively across Spain, Morocco, and North America. The artist's early works—mythological and allegorical subjects such as *Prometheus Forged on a Rock* and *Asceticism and the Joy of Living*—reflect academic conventions.

But travel gradually transformed his approach. During his stay in the United States, from 1866 to 1871, Buchser captured a nation grappling with the aftermath of the Civil War. He portrayed American presidents and civil rights leaders, but also Confederate generals like Robert E. Lee, who were fighting to keep slavery, and Black soldiers and civilians whose lives bore witness to the unfinished fight for equality. His paintings, such as *The Return of the Volunteer*, document the contradictions and divisions of a country at a crossroads. Today, Buchser's work invites viewers to consider the forces that shaped the 19th century—and how art can both reflect and participate in histories of nationalism, racism, and memory.

Artist-Friends (Room 28)

In 1861, Camille Pissarro and Paul Cezanne, then aged thirty and twenty-one respectively, crossed paths in Paris and quickly discovered that they had a lot in common. Both aimed at making a living through their art while leaving behind the

prevailing academic style that favored grand history painting. Much like other impressionist artists, they worked in the open air, often side by side, trying to capture their fleeting observations of the landscape on their canvases.

Throughout his life, Pissarro focused on rural subjects, championing the working lives of farmers and villagers. Cezanne, while also concerned with landscape, gradually developed a more experimental approach. He strove to convey not just whatever met the eye, but also the emotions that might evoke. His technique of applying small daubs of paint was intended to weave the disparate elements of a painting into a unified whole by blending sensation and structure, the seen and the felt.

On the Threshold of Modernity (Room 31)

Ferdinand Hodler is considered as one of Switzerland's most renowned artists. To imbue his representations of nature, people, and emotions with symbolic meaning and universal relevance, he distilled his motifs to their core elements, meticulously attending to the smallest details. Especially in his lineation, whether defining mountain silhouettes or the contours of the human form, such as in the figure in *Communion with the Infinite*, Hodler strove to achieve both rhythmic dynamism and a sense of inner harmony.

At the turn of the century, Hodler was inundated with commissions for private portraits and murals in public buildings in Switzerland. He often created multiple versions of popular paintings that sold well. His tireless work earned him significant success across Europe. During the early twentieth century there was such a surge of artistic innovation that Hodler's work was already perceived as classically timeless during his own lifetime.