

Adolf Wölfli's World: His Life and Work

By Elka Spoerri

Adolf Wölfli, the youngest of seven brothers, was born on February 29, 1864. The Wölfli family lived in Bern, Switzerland, during an era of great poverty, unemployment, and social crisis. Thievery and other crimes were common, especially among itinerant workers. His father, Jakob, was a stonecutter; he was also an alcoholic who worked hard when he was sober but was idle and abusive when inebriated. He gradually succumbed to the temptations of crime and spent a good deal of time in prison, ultimately abandoning the family when Adolf was about five years old. Two of Adolf's brothers, one of whom was also named Adolf, died before the age of three; two others became petty criminals and spent time in prison. Wölfli's mother, Anna, worked as a laundress and a housekeeper and worked a small plot of land to support herself and her youngest child. In 1872 Anna fell ill; she and Adolf returned to their native village of Schangnau, Canton Bern, in accordance with Bernese "poor" laws, and as wards of the community they were separated and sent to work for different farmers in exchange for food and lodging. When Anna died in 1873, young Adolf, then only eight years old, continued the hard life of a child hireling; he worked for a series of farming families, some of whom were abusive and negligent. Nevertheless, he excelled in school, completing his formal education in 1879.

From 1880 to 1895, Wölfli worked as an itinerant farmhand and a handyman, traveling within the cantons of Bern and Neuchâtel. In 1882 he fell in love with the daughter of a neighboring farmer, but her parents forbade the union. The loss haunted Wölfli for the rest of his life. He wrote about this when he was ordered to enter the Waldau Mental Asylum in 1895: "I became downcast, even melancholy, and was at my wit's end. That same evening I rolled in the snow and wept for the happiness so cruelly snatched from me . . . my heart had suffered too much."¹

In 1883 and 1884 he fulfilled his military obligation, training in the infantry at Lucerne. In Bern in 1888 and 1889, Wölfli was involved with two women—a young prostitute and a widow twenty years his senior—but both relationships were broken off. While Wölfli did not get embroiled in a criminal life, he was apprehended twice for petty theft of tobacco, and served a week in jail each time.

Gradually, Wölfli's life in Bern became more and more lonely. In the spring of 1890, while on a walk in the woods of nearby Bremgarten Forest, he tried to entice a fourteen-year-old girl to engage in sexual activity. When she cried out, the girl's companions came immediately to her rescue and Wölfli, after giving false information about himself, made his escape. Later that summer, he again approached a girl, a seven-year-old this time, clearly intending to molest her. He was again caught before he succeeded, but this time he was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to two years in prison. While there, he had a vision of the episode: “[It] had to be my sweetheart”—referring back to the lost love of his youth.² After he was released, he found it harder and harder to find a job. He worked as a gardener, a gravedigger, a mason, and a deliveryman. His various landlords and others around him found his behavior increasingly strange. He became pious but also more and more angry and explosive.

Wölfli's final break with society came in 1895, following an attempt to molest a three-year-old girl. He was caught, and on June 3 he was sent to the Waldau Mental Asylum (now the Psychiatric University Clinic, Bern) for evaluation. When questioned about his behavior, Wölfli said that he was aware that it was forbidden; he had resorted to such actions, he said, because the rich parents of his beloved had forced him to give her up. The medical examiners at Waldau diagnosed schizophrenia and declared him mentally incompetent. Wölfli was thirty-one years old; he remained in the Waldau Mental Asylum until his death in 1930.

Though no one noticed it at the time, Wölfli's talent and inclination for writing were manifest from the moment he entered Waldau. In response to the admission questionnaire at

Waldau, he wrote a brief autobiography. Subdivided into five chapters—“My Early Years,” “Further Fateful Events and Trials,” “The House of Correction,” “The Daylight Reveals It All,” and “The End”—“A Short Life Story” describes real events of his life and gives exact names and addresses.

During his first years at Waldau, Wölfli was an extremely agitated and violent patient. In 1899, however, his state began to improve. By this time, Wölfli had begun to draw, and periods when he drew and was calmer alternated with periods of agitation and aggression. Other patients often tore up his drawings, provoking him to further violence, and consequently he often had to be kept in isolation. Because no drawings have been preserved from the 1899 to 1903 period, the entries in the medical history remain the only testimony on the beginnings of Wölfli’s art. At first there are only yearly entries; later, more and more detailed accounts record his mental state and his artistic activities. The first entry dates from November 1899: “Patient passes the time with drawings.”³ One year later, it is said that Wölfli “draws a lot of notes and composes (he says) large pieces of music.” In January 1902 Wölfli is said to “be calmer, since he is allowed to draw and gets every week a new pencil”; in October, his caretakers observed that “He has drawn very industriously for the entire summer and used up his pencil weekly; his drawings are very stupid stuff, a chaotic jumble of notes, words, figures, and he gives to the individual pieces fantastic names. . . .”

It was in 1907 that the first fortuitous event occurred in Wölfli’s dismal life: he met Dr. Walter Morgenthaler (1883–1965), who worked as a psychiatrist at Waldau intermittently from 1907 to 1919. Morgenthaler was supportive and encouraged Wölfli’s work, which he documented during the artist’s lifetime. In 1921 he published a pioneering monograph on Wölfli’s life and work, *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler*.⁴ Never before had a patient been called an artist and had his name used in a book’s title; even today, such treatment is most unusual. Wölfli’s self-

assurance as a person and as an artist was decisively augmented through Morgenthaler's attention and interest.

Wölfli's work can be divided into seven distinct groups. Early Work; Bread Art, or single-sheet drawings; and the narrative bookworks—*From the Cradle to the Grave*; *Geographic and Algebraic Books*; *Books with Songs and Dances*; *Album Books with Dances and Marches*; and the *Funeral March*. The bookworks comprise a monumental 25,000 pages of richly illustrated text. With some interruptions, Wölfli was also occupied from 1916 until 1921 with the decoration of two large wooden cupboards and two small vitrines at the Waldau Museum. He pasted drawings onto the large panels of the cupboards and in the smaller areas drew directly on the wood. The museum had been established in 1914 on Morgenthaler's initiative. It housed Wölfli's drawings and works by patients from other asylums in Switzerland, as well as medical equipment and other historical objects used in the care of the insane, such as straightjackets, belts, and covered bathtubs. The museum, which was open only by appointment, was visited by psychiatrists, a few members of the general public, and several artists. After Wölfli's death, all his books were preserved inside the decorated cupboards, where they remained until their removal to the Adolf Wölfli Foundation at the Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, in 1973.

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The intensity of Adolf Wölfli's pictorial language makes a profound and lasting impact on the viewer from the very first encounter. For decades, the information available about the work was fragmentary, making the content almost impossible to comprehend. Full-length analysis has now rendered this content essentially accessible. Though no single all-embracing interpretation has been reached, there is now, at long last, a great deal of specific knowledge about structure, chronological articulation, and the connections between the separate parts of the work.

Early Work: Drawings (1904–1907)

Wölfli began to draw at Waldau Mental Asylum in 1899, but no works completed before 1904 have survived. The drawings from 1904 and 1905 form a unified group, a well-defined block marked by high-quality draftsmanship and artistic vision. These drawings are the foundation of Wölfli's art. Here, we find those elements of form and content that would come to characterize all his work. Indeed, this compact early group occupies a special position in his oeuvre, for if Wölfli had not created anything else, these drawings alone would suffice to secure his place among the visionary artists of the twentieth century. Only a single drawing from 1906 is extant—*Giant-Bell Grampo-Lina*.⁵ That no further drawings are preserved is astonishing. Similarly, only two pieces from 1907—see *Felsenau, Bern* (fig. 00)—are known, and they are both in full color.

Of the fifty surviving early drawings, forty-three are executed on identically sized newsprint pages of 39 1/4 by 29 1/2 inches; the others are of varying smaller sizes. The predominant medium is lead pencil; on two pieces blue colored pencil is also used. About half are one-page drawings and the others are compositions of two pages (see *Assizes of the Middle-Land*, fig. 00) and four pages (see *The Divine Almighty and Wisdom at Zenith*, fig. 00, and *Sunring*, fig. 00). In many cases—all the drawings from 1904, for example—inscribed page numbers provide an understanding of both composition and order of execution. In other instances, however—such as the twenty-three drawings that survive from 1905—there are no page numbers and so the works' sequence and interrelations cannot be reconstructed with certainty. Yet through the carryover of shapes from one drawing to another, we can recognize some complete compositions on four pages. Symmetry rules the series. Large mandalalike shapes are formed out of circles and ovals. In the compositions that extend over more than one page, the shapes—circular, oval, and otherwise—are joined perfectly from page to page. In the compositions that occupy several pages, there is a carryover not only of the design motifs but also of the content—in *Jeremias Gotthelf von Lützelflüh*, for instance, Wölfli depicts the signs of the zodiac from Leo to

Capricorn, and in *Sunring*, he picks up with Aquarius and goes full-circle to Cancer.⁶ This continuity from one composition to another suggests that other connections of content may have existed for Wölfli; because of the number of lost drawings, however, no others have been identified.

Wölfli's vocabulary of form can be divided as follows: transformational ornaments, ornamental bands, signs, and geometric forms. Though they are sometimes used separately, these forms are frequently combined and made to serve more than one function simultaneously. To make the forms stand out individually and to produce contrasts of light and dark, the artist used a variety of shading devices, such as cross-hatching, dots, and stripes. Together with the straight and circular contour lines that he drew freehand, these shading devices and fillers stand as testimony to his great ability as a graphic artist.

One of the most important transformational ornaments is the "snail." The simplest of forms, the snail consists of a longish, flat crescent shape sometimes marked with a line and a dot, as an eye and ear, sometimes with just a line. In some drawings, Wölfli gives them specific names: Bandage-Snail, Snail-Star-Ring, Herdsman-Snail, Herdswoman-Snail. The snails appear singly or as symmetrical pairs, sometimes in bundles and sometimes in bands. Larger snails with pronounced eyes look like mice or rats. Related to the snail is the "bird" form, which in the early drawings differs from the snail only in its articulated curved neck and slightly raised tail. Wölfli gave names to some of these snail/bird figures: Fountain-Bird, Midwife-Bird, Music-Barrel-Bird. Later, in the illustrations that accompany the narrative work, the bird becomes the most important motif in Wölfli's vocabulary. Another transformational ornament is the "triangle face." In its simplest form it consists of just two dots for eyes and a line or hole for a mouth. The more evolved faces have spectacle-like eyes, feathered-wing ears, and moustaches. Wölfli's haunting black eye mask does not emerge until the narrative bookwork.

The most prevalent ornamental band features a string of what Wölfli called “bells,” circle or oval forms strung together like beads. The distinct motif may be tied to a memory of his youth in Schangnau; even today, strings of cowbells are hung under the low eaves of village roofs during winter, creating alternately lovely chimes or a frightening cacaphony as the bells clang in the winds. The bells are often embellished with dots, dashes, crosshatching, and the occasional spiral, forming a rosette (see *Sunring*). Swaths of parallel stripes form another common ornamental band; sometimes straight, sometimes arced, they look like musical staves without notes. The bands serve to brace the compositions and direct the eye, contributing a sense of movement as they start and stop and occasionally resume across multiple pages of a composition, much like a track interrupted by a tunnel (see *Assizes of the Middle-Land*).

The signs Wölfli used are primarily the letters *B, E, H, I, N, Z*, and of course *A* and *W*, his initials. The letters are sometimes manipulated and abstracted to fit within spaces, thus rendering elements that can be read as both positive and negative images. This is an example of the binary perception in Wölfli’s work, by means of which positive and negative spaces are equally readable and alternately seize the viewer’s attention. In some of the works from 1905, Wölfli inserted human faces into the empty spaces of his letters—for instance, above and below the crossbar of a stylized letter *H* (see *Sunring*). Other signs used by Wölfli include the great many numerals in the drawings, which serve as indications of musical rhythm, especially the series 2, 4, 8, 16, 32.

Individual geometric forms include squares, rectangles, triangles, diamonds, circles, ovals, spirals, fish scales, the occasional cross—which appears atop heads in his later work—and eight-pointed stars, which are often used as insignias on figures. The geometric forms are sometimes joined together to make ornamental bands or filler patterns, like brickwork.

The artist, of course, did not limit himself to abstract forms. There are also figurative representations in the early drawings—people, animals, interiors, and landscapes. Most renderings are portraits or self-portraits (with Wölfli always representing himself in this early work as an adult). In addition to friends and acquaintances, Wölfli portrayed public figures of the

political and cultural spheres. The men carry weapons—rifles, swords, spears, and axes—as well as fishing rods, canes, bats, flags, and scepters, while female attributes and accessories include elaborate hairdos decorated with flowers, aprons, high-heeled shoes, mirrors, trailing skirts, purses, and parasols. Sometimes the figures hold fruit in the palms of their hands. Wölfli repeated specific gestures throughout his work to characterize the figures and the action, such as a hand raised in greeting, two hands clasped together, an admonishing finger, a finger pointing at a person or an object. Landscapes feature mountains, trees, farmhouses, hotels, monuments, fountains, bridges, portals, arcades, windows, screens, and staircases. Interiors are equipped with clocks, candleholders, and lamps. Animals represented include fish, cats, rams, horses, cows, goats, and panthers, as well as the snake and the butterfly, which hold important meaning for Wölfli.

Wölfli's greatest themes were transformation and rebirth, and the snake and butterfly both stand as symbols for these. The butterfly, with its origin as a caterpillar and its transformation into chrysalis and subsequent emergence from the cocoon symbolizes resurrection and the soul liberating itself from the body's enclosure (see *Medical Faculty*, fig. 00). The snake, shown biting its tail in depictions throughout history, is often a circle, with all the symbolism that shape entails. Furthermore, snakes molt, thus going through a transformation or rebirth of their own. Other symbols favored by Wölfli include the oval and the mirror image. From earliest times, the oval, or egg, has stood for unity and the cycle of life: reproduction, birth, rebirth.

As for content, the early drawings elude a single conclusive interpretation. Only a few of the manifold strands of superimposed themes and possible readings can be isolated, and even those are sometimes partial. The appearance of mandalas in the early drawings can be viewed as a breakthrough of great import: unified geometric order replacing chaos. Jung suggested that mandalas are generally supportive and helpful for persons in chaotic mental states; the appearance of such a primary symbolic form as the mandala and the primary mathematical principle of binary pattern and progression indicate the artist's quest for harmony.

In view of this strong impulse toward harmony, it is not surprising that Wölfli preferred to think of these drawings as musical compositions. He called them “sound pieces” and signed them “Composer,” even though they have little in common with the usual forms of music notation: the staves are empty, and any indications of rhythm (e.g., “2:1,” “4:2”), duration (“music end,” “music begin”), or instrumentation (“trumpet,” “tam,” “cymbal”) are written on separate areas of the drawings. The empty staves in the drawings suggest that Wölfli conceived of music not only as sound itself but also as the visual sight/site of sound.

The Narrative Oeuvre (1908–1930)

When Walter Morgenthaler joined the psychiatric staff at Waldau in 1907, Wölfli’s early drawings and “A Short Life Story,” his autobiography, were available in the records.

Morgenthaler’s interest in Wölfli’s past and the questions he asked about his life may well have precipitated the creation of *Felsenau, Bern*, a key piece marking the transition from mostly lead pencil drawings into the colorful narrative oeuvre. It shows the Felsenau textile mill and factory near Bern, the surrounding countryside, and two extraordinary natural phenomena: the comet Coggia and the Northern Lights (both documented in the year 1870). The topography—the factory site, the steep access road, the tunnel—corresponds exactly to the local features. Wölfli knew the factory and the surroundings very well from his childhood, for he had lived with his mother in neighboring Neubrücke from 1870 to 1871.

The fruitful encounter between Wölfli and Morgenthaler had as its precondition Wölfli’s persistent lonely work on the early drawings. The skill he acquired through that work must have given him his self-confidence as an artist. His laborious molding of archetypes and general systems of order gave Wölfli the necessary spiritual protection against the chaotic states of his psychosis and enabled him to observe his own life story more calmly and to depict it in narrative form.

Wölfli's narrative oeuvre, which he commenced in 1908 and continued without interruption until his death in 1930, was the artist's life's work. It consists of prose texts interwoven with poems, musical compositions, and illustrations. Forty-five large volumes and sixteen school notebooks, numbering twenty-five thousand densely filled pages, have been preserved.⁷ A comprehensive view of his writings clearly shows that even in its monumental and multilayered scope, the whole is a unified work. Content, form, and language dynamically interact, and each of these elements is continuously transformed through the course of the entire text.

The work begins with *From the Cradle to the Grave*, Wölfli's imaginary autobiography. In the next stage, Wölfli expanded his life story into the realm of myth, developing the *Geographic and Algebraic Books*, a fantastic narrative of travels and adventures throughout the universe and of his own transformation into St. Adolf-Giant-Creation. His descriptions of the cosmos culminate in his creation of a new world, the world of St. Adolf II. In the songs, polkas, mazurkas, and marches of the *Books with Songs and Dances* and the *Album Books with Dances and Marches*, Wölfli celebrates the events of his imaginary life story and of the St. Adolf-Giant-Creation. The hymnlike epic reaches its climax in the *Funeral March*, a profound finale in which the rigorous rhythm of both word and number series achieve a perpetual movement that suggests an infinite flow.

Wölfli worked on his writings continuously for twenty-two years; because of his astonishingly systematic organization, the formal structure of this complex work is accessible as a whole, and its content is coherent. Wölfli provided nearly all his books with numbers and titles. Notes inserted in the text inform the reader about the interrelations within the different groups. All books are carefully dated and signed. Some pages—the 1908 pages of *From the Cradle to the Grave*, for instance, and the 1929–1930 pages of the *Funeral March*—are successively numbered, while others, such as those recounting the cosmic voyages of the *Geographic and Algebraic Books*, have no page numbers. The texts of the middle period, *Books with Songs and*

Dances and Album Books with Dances and Marches, are ordered by a complicated but reliable numbering of the songs they contain.

In size, the books are as large as folios of the large newspaper format: approximately 19 1/2 by 14 3/8 inches. Just as he had for the early drawings, Wölfli used sheets of newsprint supplied by the staff at Waldau. The first books are relatively thin; the later volumes are thicker, eventually measuring up to about 20 inches. Stacked in a single pile, they make a tower nearly ten feet high. Wölfli wrote his texts with pencils or, occasionally, colored pencils, in the old German Gothic (*Sütterlin*) script. His idiosyncratic orthography and punctuation are used consistently throughout. The texts are richly illustrated with more than 1,620 drawings and 1,640 collages.

From the Cradle to the Grave (1908–1912)

Wölfli conceived the series of nine books (numbered 1–5, 9, 10, 1A, 17) as a coherent work:

From the Cradle to the Grave; Or; Through Work and Sweat, Suffering and Ordeals, Even through Prayer into Damnation. Manifold Travels, Adventures, Accidental Calamities, Hunting and Other Experiences of a Lost Soul Erring about the Globe; or, A Servant of God without a Head Is More Miserable Than the Most Miserable of Wretches. The text runs without interruption from book to book and contains more than 2,970 pages and 752 illustrations in pencil and colored pencil. At the end of the series, Wölfli gave instructions to a printer, K.J. Wyss in Bern, regarding the title, execution, price, and distribution of the book (see p. 00) [**CROSS-REF TO TRANSLATIONS SECTION**]. The chapter headings, added after the drawings and narrative texts were completed, are done in red pencil and squeezed into the small available space between the lines. Wölfli first ordered the written folios into thin books, then bound them together into the thick books we have now.

The narrative of *From the Cradle to the Grave* is dated in two ways: by the dates the work was written (1908–1912) and by the dates within the narrative (1866–1872). Wölfli is both protagonist and narrator. As narrator, he signs as the adult author, Adolf Wölfli, sometimes adding Writer, Draftsman, and Musician, and often Accident, Victim of Misfortune, or Calamity Victim. Throughout the narrative, Wölfli again and again depicts himself as an accident victim or a victim of some calamity. The constantly recurring descriptions of “accidents and ordeals” predominantly involve the child Doufi, Wölfli’s alter-ego (Doufi is a nickname for Adolf), and always include both a threat and a rescue. Doufi plunges into an abyss, for instance, or is swallowed by wild animals—mostly snakes—or monsters, but is rescued every time by his mother, brothers, or friends. Pictures of calamities are often followed by mandalas—additional protection against catastrophe—on the same or succeeding pages. Wölfli describes several disasters involving water, in which a single person or hundreds of people are killed, but he does not illustrate them. He limits himself to depicting the “rescue committees,” medals awarded for rescues, or monuments erected in memory of the victims. There are many battle scenes—brawls and murder among men, or men fighting with animals. Sexual transgressions are punished by hanging. The hybrid beings—half-animal, half-man—are not monsters but derivations from popular cartoons of bears, cats, dogs, and other animals costumed and acting like humans.

From the Cradle to the Grave recounts Wölfli’s imaginary life story in the form of a travelogue. Doufi, age two to eight, is accompanied on his travels to different parts of the globe by an ever-growing group of relatives and friends, members of the so-called Swiss Hunters and Nature Explorers Traveling Society. Wölfli situates Doufi’s adventures in a period of time that was still “beautiful” for him, the time before the death of his mother and the beginning of his life as a foster child. The story begins with the family’s emigration to America in 1866, when Doufi is just two years old (see p. 00) [CROSS-REF TO TRANSLATIONS SECTION] After a stay of about ten months in New York, the family moves to the Atlantic island of St. Helena and then back to Europe, from which the imaginary journeys and adventures expand “more or less over the

whole earth”: to Asia, Australia, Africa, America, Greenland, and a fictive continent that Wölfli calls Southern Meridian.

A great deal of Wölfli’s inspiration probably came from his reading in the Waldau library, which contained books with travel descriptions, edifying devotional literature, daily and weekly newspapers, monthly magazines, a humorous magazine of witticisms, and various almanacs. One of the sources Wölfli used most was the illustrated magazine *Über Land und Meer*, which he quotes again and again in his oeuvre, citing the passages and illustrations that interested him and indicating the exact year, volume, title, and page.⁸ It is important to note that Wölfli used this magazine exclusively as sources of information and stimulation for his texts, not as models for his own images. *Über Land und Meer* and its layout on the whole, however, did serve as model for the design of his books in regard to title, data about editor, author, printer, and place of publication, and the page numbers on the individual volumes.

Beginning in 1908, Wölfli developed one of the most important motifs of his formal vocabulary—the bird—into its definitive form. The bodies of the birds are longish, tubular shapes, with two feet in front. On each bird’s head is a point and an elongated oval mark shaped like a semicolon; the first could be an eye, the second an ear (or mouth). These primal shapes can be read as hallucinatory emblems. Less abstractly, they are also building blocks, fillers, or symbols and serial elements that can be used to form larger figures. They appear in every one of Wölfli’s pictures made between 1908 and 1930, serving as emotional counterweights to the human faces in Wölfli’s work which are marked by impassivity and gravity. Drawn only in outline or filled with color, the birds appear coy and animated, standing still or flying, seemingly protective—never threatening—expressing excitation and sometimes danger. Very often, a bird’s body is filled with musical notes or interlocking bricks.

Geographic and Algebraic Books (1912–1916)

In the seven *Geographic and Algebraic Books* (numbered 6–8 and 11–14), Wölfli describes the emergence of the St. Adolf-Giant-Creation. The first three books contain his “Building Foundations”: Doufi has accumulated a fortune from “Charity Donations” given in sympathy for his calamities; he buys up the imaginary places he visited earlier, rebuilds cities and countries, and creates public enterprises and social institutions, traffic systems, and other infrastructure. He is shaping the future. This activity culminates in Book 11 with the metamorphosis of the Swiss Hunters and Nature Explorers Traveling Society into a Giant-Travel-Avant-Garde, the transposition of the travels around the earth into travels around the cosmos, the substitution of gods for the world regents, the encounter with God-Father, and finally, the formation of the St. Adolf-Giant-Creation. Whereas the “Building Foundations” still refers to real events, the cosmic descriptions—though treated in a brashly realistic manner—attain a visionary dimension. He and his companions leave the earth and continue their travels in the cosmos, directed by God-Father, on the Giant-Airplane. Wölfli describes the fantastical visions he encounters with God-Father and other divinities. Persons from his childhood now appear as Great-Great-Gods, and Goddesses, and are connected to these cosmic experiences.

The language Wölfli used to depict cosmic events and describe cosmic scenery is often ponderous and ornate, replete with chains of adjectives and nouns. Since the conventional numerical system does not go far enough for the vast exaggerations necessary to describe the St. Adolf Giant Creation, he takes the traditional numbers through quadrillion and then expands them by twenty-three new numerical units. At first, the highest number in this invented system is Oberon; later, he supplements it with an even larger number, ultimately the largest one, which he calls *Zorn* (“rage”).

In the last three books, Wölfli describes the expansion of the St. Adolf-Giant-Creation and of his efforts, with the Giant-Travel-Avant-Garde, to revamp the magazine *Über Land und*

Meer. The magazine is “rewritten, photographed and drawn anew” with the goal of getting it printed after the return to Bern. He also begins to quote the measurements of the “geographic descriptions” according to a “highly personal Weight-System” with a “Calculation-Index.” In these three books, Wölfli celebrates his new creation and asserts a new direction: “From this point the geographic region is structured and celebrated in music.”

Wölfli signs the *Geographic and Algebraic Books* as Knight-Adolf, Emperor-Adolf, St. Adolf, St. Adolf-Great-Great-God, A Fatality, Dying Excellency, or, sometimes, simply Doufi. Then, in 1916, with a touch of irony, Wölfli formulated his new name: St. Adolph the I., Great-King of Grenoble-St. Adolf-King, Giant-City in Savojen; last named with an additional calculation-supplement of 50 hours is my third-youngest brother as a Great-God! And I am, St. Adolf the II., Couscous King and Great-Great-God. Bern, Friday, the 23d of June, 1916. For a long time after, he signed his works as St. Adolf II, conferring on himself a new identity well-earned by sixteen arduous years of work as a draftsman and a writer. At this point, he seems to have reached the peak of his visionary energy. After that, moved by expansive euphoria, Wölfli enlarged the format of the books, but in the story itself, relative calm ensued. Wölfli invented no other “Foundations,” but instead celebrated his creation in ever new variations.

In the *Geographic and Algebraic Books*, Wölfli continued to use newsprint paper, but he also introduced kraft paper, and gradually increased the size of the books. He also developed two new picture types: number pictures and music pictures. These are the representational forms that accompany the St. Adolf-Giant-Creation and the events in the cosmic world, in contrast to the figurative illustrations related to the text in *From the Cradle to the Grave*. The absence of illustrative drawings may also be due to Wölfli’s attempt to realize his St. Adolf-Giant-Creation on a cosmic scale, with his ever recurring and growing foundation enterprises absorbing the entirety of his creative energy.

The number pictures in Books 6, 7, 8, 11, and 12 originate in the calculation of interest accruing from Doufi's imaginary fortune. These images, reiterated in lead or colored pencil, are most impressive in their design. They reflect not only Wölfli's need for order but also his fascination with the incremental power of financial capital. The first part of Book 12 contains number pictures that are frequently combined with figurative motifs, fitted around the page as ornamental borders, that depict Doufi's falls, execution scenes, or rows of figures and buildings (see *The Waterfall in Zion*, fig. 00, and *Palace of the Inquisition on the St. Adolf-Star-Giant-Glacier*, fig. 00). In the second part of Book 12, Wölfli executes number pictures not only in numerals but also in words, using the names of his invented numerical system and sometimes combining them with portions of musical notations.

The music pictures exist primarily as musical notation, but some are combined with ornamental or figurative elements. They appear for the first time at the end of Book 11, in a series of fifteen drawings. The first seven are horizontal and resemble conventional music scores (see *Giant Canary: Wingspan 10 Meters*, fig. 00). In the other eight, Wölfli progresses to spiral or mandalalike vertical compositions. After the middle of Book 12, music pictures increasingly replace number pictures, and in Book 13 they predominate. Gradually, the musical notations become activated: both the notation marks and the spaces between exist as entities and become readable, just as the positive and negative forms are (see *The Heavenly Ladder*, fig. 00, and *Folio March, Beat 4 1/2–8 1/2*, fig. 00). Executed in pencil, the dense fabric of notes produces a graying effect with the dull sheen of lead tending toward darkness. In the vertical central axis of the compositions, Wölfli gradually incorporates human figures: crucifixion scenes, coffins with dead people laid out in state, series of crowned faces. These figurative elements executed in color intensify the overall impact of these pages. In Book 13 the first six collages appear in the spaces between the musical notation bands (see *At a Paris Art Show*, fig. 00, and *Grammophon*, fig. 00). In Book 14, the musical notations disappear, replaced by solmization.

Books with Songs and Dances (1917–1922)

The *Books with Songs and Dances* (numbered 15–20) are dense, each measuring between 7 13/16 inches and 19 1/2 inches in thickness. Book 15 was originally 23 3/8 inches thick, and on its cover Wölfli wrote: “The Book of 36 kilos burst in two, St. A. II.” Book 17, at nearly 20 inches, is the thickest preserved volume. In these books Wölfli used many different kinds of paper, adjusting their size to the book format by folding them in various ways. He availed himself of kraft paper, gift-wrapping paper, used paper tablecloths complete with coffee stains, cardboard packaging, city maps, railway schedules, casino posters, clinical reports, and doctors’ diplomas. Books 18 and 19 bear the additional titles *First Zion-Book* and *Second Zion-Book*.

These books are filled with music—songs, polkas, mazurkas, and marches—consisting of dialect, phonetic rhymes, and solmization. The dances are titled with women’s names, such as Santa Ida or Santa Lina—or they have invented names—Kannari, Dalaari. Occasionally, they are named for real people or real events, such as “Dr. Morgenthaler Polka” and the “Plebiscite Polka.” As he does in the *Geographic and Algebraic Books*, Wölfli celebrates events and persons from his earlier stories in a seemingly endless variety of ways. An important new element of these books is the numbering system with which he orders the musical compositions. This system forms the basic principle of organization, since what constitutes the text is less and less a narrative progression, consisting instead of fragments accompanied by passages of dialect and solfège.

Wölfli classifies the musical compositions according to type of dance, voice, tempo, beat, measure, and song number. The longest dance, “Santa Ida and Santa Lina-Polka,” encompasses 2,755 song numbers. When he bound the books in the middle of a song sequence or dance, Wölfli often inserted another, totally different song or dance sequence. For instance, a mazurka would be

introduced in the middle of a polka. This interruption would assure a continual linkage over several books, for the reader would have to wait for the continuation of suspended songs or dances.

After 1917 the illustrations for the *Books with Songs and Dances* become rarer and rarer. They consist primarily of pasted reproductions of individual pictures or of several pictures in collage on large folded pages (see *The Cradle Flag*, fig. 00). The musical compositions are noted exclusively in solfège. The many repetitions of letters and syllables, the underlining of rhythm indicators, and the music signs themselves give the pages the visual appearance of decorative calligraphy. In a foreword to Book 20, titled "Final Text," Wölfli explains what hinders him from finishing his extensive narrative work:

The end. Esteemed reader and women readers, because of my painful disease and hideous further sufferings my undersigned humble person finds itself forced to directly conclude the great, instructive, entertaining and beautiful Book that should not be underestimated in any way in regard to its unfinished content; that should not prevent the eventuality of adding to the above-mentioned a number of meaningful, beautiful and memorable pictures, musical pictures, the musical execution of which I have sufficient energy and endurance to complete no longer. And yet after I have worked for 22 full years on this complicated oeuvre and have completed the third part of the whole Book, I should like to add to the aforementioned still another pretty final act, which certainly will give joy and pleasure to some musical genius. Here follows a beautiful, eleven-partite, Final-March-Blast, consisting of 11 songs.
1,922.

Album Books with Dances and Marches (1924–1925, 1927–1928)

In spite of his announcement in the “Final Text” of 1922, Wölfli did not stop writing and composing; he only changed the design and the manner of illustrating the next eight books (none of which are illustrated in this catalog). They have a consistently horizontal format and are thinner and easier to handle than the *Books with Songs and Dances*. Only the first four are numbered (1–4), however, and only a few of the books are titled.

All eight books contain musical compositions, again noted in solfège. The texts are dated 1924 and 1925, whereas the drawings are from 1927 and 1928, when Wölfli evidently bound them into albums and titled them; there are no preserved texts from 1923, 1926, 1927, or 1928. Fewer and fewer “geographic texts” are inserted between the musical compositions. The narrative texts are increasingly reduced, and key terms substitute for the expanded storytelling found in the earlier work. Wölfli refers to these key terms by name or nickname in the progression of the songs. The dances and marches are ordered according to the “Ring” numbers, which are combined with a long series of continuously numbered names: “Blast, 7. Ring, 707. Ludmilla, 7. Female Teacher, 745.” A musical composition recorded in solfège follows, and the number of the next song progresses with each word, song after song: “Blast, 8. Ring, 708. Ludmilla, 8. Female Teacher 746.” All but the “Ring” numbers of each successive song vary or disappear, but the “Rings” can be counted on to provide the actual sequence of the songs. In the course of the enumeration, some single words can be repeated up to a thousand times; others are repeated only ten, thirty, or fifty times before they finish their cycle and are superseded by new words, with which the count begins anew.

Four of these books contain a middle part in which drawings done on high-quality paper are bound. These works were originally from a series of twenty-four drawings that Wölfli intended for sale. In their layout and format, the *Album Books with Dances and Marches* recall standard picture albums. Evidently, in the design of these albums, Wölfli was at pains to bring the

drawings into some relation with his narrative work. The added drawings are numbered on the back and provided with “explanations,” which refer only to the “preceding pictures” and not to the songs or texts of the albums. The texts and songs of the eight books contain 201 pasted reproductions, which Wölfli titles “Picture-Puzzles” and numbers as a continuous series. In witty, mock-heroic verses of horror tales, he celebrates current events, personages, and places in Switzerland and abroad.

Funeral March (1928–1930)

The *Funeral March*, which Wölfli worked on persistently during the last two years of his life, forms the conclusion of the artist’s literary work. The written record of his illness (in the medical history) documents his unbroken determination to bring this work to completion. Even a serious intestinal operation in March 1930 hardly diminished his production. In the medical entries, it is noted that Wölfli had started working on the *Funeral March* in December 1928. There are no surviving books with a 1928 dating, however, and pages 1 through 2,395 are missing. Today, sixteen books are extant, the pages densely written and carefully numbered from 2,396 to 8,354.⁹ Wölfli did not designate numbers for the books either, but he did offer the following notice on one of the covers: “Attention: The numerous Books of the Funeral March were not numbered from the start! Just follow the numbering of the pages. St. Adolf II, Author. 1,929.”

The books of the *Funeral March* are bound in horizontal format. In the last ten of them, Wölfli wrote the text in such a way that the reader has to turn up the pages from the bottom instead of from the right. The last book remained unfinished; Wölfli wrote on only thirty-six of its 136 pages. On several pages, he left empty spaces annotated with the titles of the reproductions he intended to place there. Already cut and ready to be pasted, the pictures are tipped in loose on the respective pages. Clearly, the look of the pages was neither the accidental result of the writing

process nor in any way “automatic writing,” but was designed by Wölfli well in advance; the space for one or several illustrations was determined before he began to write.

All the books of the *Funeral March* are signed St. Adolf II. To this are added descriptive titles and other information, as in this long signature: “St. Adolf II Algebrator, Major-Commander and Music-Director, Giant-Theater-Director, Almighty-Steamship-Captain, and Dr. of Art and Science, Director of the Algebra and Geography-Books-Fabrication and Hunter-General. Inventor of 160 self-made inventions, highly valuable and patented, each of them, by the Russian Czar, and glorious victor of numerous, enormous gigantic battles.”

Wölfli conceived the *Funeral March* as a musical composition on a grand scale: “Everyone who knows anything about music will be able to play the march, it will be printed and will bring in hundreds of thousands of francs.” **CITE SOURCE** The composition is not recorded in musical signs or in solmization; it consists of phonetic structure rhymed with the vowels *A, E, I, O,* and *U,* which melt into one single body of sound. In this way, Wölfli takes up the expressive tonal qualities of language, its onomatopoetic value as sound. The series of phonetic structures is interrupted, in rare cases, by short geographical texts, prayers, or biblical quotations. Wölfli describes the structure of the *Funeral March* thusly:

For many years now I am working on a very beautiful and strong funeral march, which will get all together 8,850 beautiful march-songs. 7,150 songs are made already. In between there are parts with numerous beautiful poems, puzzles, funny stories and jokes: travel-stories! hunter-stories and war-stories! As well as a respectable number of beautiful pictures. The value of the whole work once it is finished will be 55,000 Fr. A so-called ‘Zion-March,’ a little smaller than this last one, I have concluded long ago and have it under my bed; it will cost 45,000 Francs.¹⁰

All the songs of the *Funeral March* are structured according to the same compositional scheme. Wölfli picks out a motif from the collage inserted in the text and develops with a dialect rhyme to *Wiiga* (“cradle”), most often with the phrase *i'd Wiiga witt* (“wishes into the cradle”). A key word referring to the pasted reproduction is worked into the rhyme sequence, establishing a connection. This song construction is carried throughout the entire *Funeral March*. The pictorial statement and the articulated, self-contained writing flow side-by-side as two interrelated yet independent streams.

In the illustrations for the *Funeral March*, Wölfli worked almost exclusively in collage.¹¹ As picture material, Wölfli uses mostly reproductions cut from illustrated magazines, often the *Illustrated London News*.¹² In spite of his isolated life in the asylum, he shows great acuity in picking out the most relevant topics and events in arenas such as sports, film, politics, city life, and even advertising. All the pictorial motifs of his previous work are paraded once again in concentrated form: female beauty, motherly love, domestic bliss, comfortable living (in contrast to his life of poverty), political and financial power, mountains and glaciers, catastrophes and idylls.

Wölfli's procedure of adding unchanged reproductions to illustrate the text allows us to understand which aspects of these motifs had acquired a meaning independent of his personal drama. The reproductions he chose document his rediscovery of the private world he had imagined and created, and which he was then able to find in the world outside. His method of quoting his own narrative and visual themes by means of the found pictures creates a connection between his private life and in the “real world.” Through his use of magazine reproductions and his ability to locate his motifs in these pictures, Wölfli seems to open himself to the world. Nevertheless, he lifts these motifs out of the pictures only to take them, as it were, back into the “cradle.”

Bread Art: Single-Sheet Drawings (1916–1930)

In his monograph on Wölfli, Morgenthaler wrote: “One can divide his works into two important groups, according to their aim: One group could be called “bread art.” This group includes drawings he does for others in exchange for plain or colored pencils, paper, tobacco, and so on. . . . The second group, to which Wölfli assigns by far the greatest value, on which he himself places a much greater value comprises his gigantic autobiography. . . .”¹³

Today, instead of using the term “Bread Art,” a reference to hack jobs done as “bread-and-butter work,” scholars speak of “single-sheet drawings”—but whatever their designation, they are fundamentally separate from the illustrations of the narrative work. The slowdown of work on the books, which Wölfli had announced in the preface of Book 20, called “Final Text,” was probably caused not so much by the “painful illness” and the “horribly bitter suffering” he complains of as by public recognition; the demand for single-sheet drawings and larger commissions increased after the publication of Morgenthaler’s monograph. But Morgenthaler reports that Wölfli did not respond gladly to the request to make drawings for other people:

Occasionally it will . . . occur to him to give a drawing, without expecting anything in return, to someone he particularly likes, especially to women and children. This is infrequent; on the contrary one often has to press him quite energetically to get him to make drawings from which others may profit. He usually answers that he doesn’t have the time or that he has more intelligent things to do.¹⁴

Almost all of the single-sheet drawings were produced between 1916 and 1930, independently from the narrative texts. They come in different sizes and are executed on high-quality drawing paper with colored pencils. Wölfli became famous exclusively on the basis of these single-sheet drawings. It was mostly these works that Morgenthaler published in his monograph, that Hans Prinzhorn knew, and that Jean Dubuffet saw and acquired on his trip through Switzerland. These were also the works exhibited in a few shows from 1945 through 1972, when “Documenta 5” was held. On the back of them are texts that Wölfli called “explanations.” The explanations do not elucidate the drawings, but they do connect the pictures to the content of his writings. All the personages, countries, and events mentioned therein can be found (albeit with many variations) in the narrative texts.

Wölfli himself referred to the single-sheet drawings as “portraits,” probably because the term seemed more appropriate for pictures he wanted to have on the wall. The concept of “portrait” may also explain the decorative frames he drew—sometimes made up of ornamental bands of simple bell motifs, sometimes of more elaborate designs—which are present in some of the early works but not present in the illustrations that accompany the writings. In the explanations, Wölfli gives names to these formal elements, such as Cherry Ring, Apricot Ring, Steampropeller Ring. On occasion, he added naturalistic renderings of pears, grapes, bowling balls, and other objects to further enhance the pictures.

The single-sheet drawings are usually simpler and more schematic in their design than are the illustrations in the early works and the narrative oeuvre. The figurative elements are limited to renderings of one or two persons. Because of the frequent inclusion of wings, these figures often resemble medieval representations of angels. The faces with ornate crowns recall tribal chieftains or extraterrestrial creatures; sometimes they wear crosses on top of their heads, suggesting religious icons (see *The Ground, Giant-Fountain-Stream*, fig. 00). The figures show very slight gender differentiation: One recognizes the males only by their moustaches. The female

figures usually extend their right arm across the left, holding an object at waist level. Sometimes this object is utilitarian—a bass violin, a fan, an umbrella—but most frequently it is a bird. The faces in the single-sheet drawings wear a kind of eye mask identical to those that appear on faces in the text illustrations. This mask, second only to the bird, is the most idiosyncratic and therefore most important form in Wölfli's work. One can perhaps connect the motif of the eye mask to those experiences and impressions that Wölfli movingly describes in "A Short Life Story":

. . . look at the frequently sunken, deepset eyes of the lower classes, where you can see all too clearly the sorrow and misery that weigh on their hearts. Not everyone who sees his grieved, martyred face in the washroom mirror in the morning is a drinker; on the contrary, the grounds for his misery are to be sought elsewhere.¹⁵

Between 1916 and 1923 the portioning of the round opaque faces into parts covered by a mask and parts free of a mask reaches its full equilibrium. Later on, in the drawings made between 1926 and 1930, the mask gradually dissolves. The birds increasingly become the dominant figures in the single-sheet drawings. The building blocks of whole compositions, they eventually come to occupy the entire space; by the end, only the faces and the hands of the human figures are left free of them.

In the mid-1920s, Wölfli worked mainly in large formats. In 1926 he executed his largest picture, *Memorandum*; this piece, commissioned by Waldau, measures nearly ten feet by 492 feet [check]. In 1926 he executed another large-format picture, *The San Salvador* (fig. 00), which measures fifty-nine by eighty-two inches and features an "explanation" of sixty-eight lines; it is Wölfli's largest mandala composition, built up with strict orderings of birds and enclosed with a wide border of musical notations.

In the last ten years of his life Wölfli was able to pay for the drawing materials he needed with the money he received from the sale of his single-sheet drawings. But even when he could get good drawing paper, he continued to order newsprint, for this paper was easier to bind into books. Very few single-sheet drawings dating from 1929 and 1930 have been found; at this time, Wölfli was concentrating on the *Funeral March*. There are some collages in the single-sheet drawings—fifteen are known today—but Wölfli’s use of the technique met with no enthusiasm from the psychiatrists or collectors, according to the medical history. Thus, Wölfli went on producing the desired drawings for his buyers; for his *Funeral March*, he worked unswervingly and almost exclusively with collages.

Analysis of Wölfli’s work as a whole shows that form and content interact in such a way that three levels of structuring can be distinguished. On the first level, Wölfli’s urge to create and talent for pictorial and narrative expression show themselves to be independent of the compulsions related to schizophrenia. On the second level, the experiences of psychosis and the contents of delusion penetrate the first, disturbing and altering it. On the third level, Wölfli succeeds in uniting the regressive and hindering factors of his illness with his artistic vision to form an integrated whole. It is Wölfli’s great achievement that he could create his art both within the domain of his illness and in spite of it. With the pictorial and literary means of this art, he was able to express the existential condition that the psychosis forced him to experience, and in so doing, he allows us an insight into his particular *condition humaine*.

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¹ Adolf Wölfli, “A Short Life Story,” (1895), in Walter Morgenthaler, *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*, trans. by Aaron H. Esman with Elka Spoerri (Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. TK.

² Ibid., p. TK.

³ Wölfli's medical records are in the collection of the Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland.

⁴ Walter Morgenthaler, *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler. Adolf Wölfli* (Bern, Switzerland: E. Bircher, 1921). English translation: *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wolfli*, trans. by Aaron H. Esman with Elka Spoerri (Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1992).

⁵ *Giant-Bell Grampo-Lina* [*Riisen-Glocke Grampo-Lina*] is in the collection of Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern. Titles derive from the lengthy inscriptions on the drawings. The English translations do not follow Wölfli's idiosyncratic spellings.

⁶ *Jeremias Gotthelf von Lützelflüh* (1905), collection Adolf Wölfli Foundation, is illustrated in Elka Spoerri, ed., *Adolf Wölfli: Draftsman, Writer, Poet, Composer* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press in association with Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, 1997), p. 19.

⁷ Collection Adolf Wölfli Foundation.

⁸ *Über Land und Meer: Allgemeine illustrierte Zeitung* [Over land and sea: **trans TK**] was published in Stuttgart, Germany, between 1858 and 1923.

⁹ Several weeks before his death, Wölfli made mistakes in the numbering: after page 8,381, he picked up with pages 8,332 to 8,354; thus, the *Funeral March* actually has 8,403 written pages.

¹⁰ The first preserved song has the number 369, the last one 2,956. In a Nov. 5, 1929, letter to Emma Beutler (collection Adolf Wölfli Foundation), Wölfli mentions that the *Funeral March* has 8,850 songs in it. Since the *Funeral March* contains only 2,956 numbered songs but 8,345 numbered pages, it is possible that when he referred to 8,850 "march-songs," he was actually referring to the number of pages.

¹¹ The *Funeral March* contains 1,149 collages and 35 drawings.

¹² Wölfli probably obtained copies of the *Illustrated London News* from the English psychiatrist Hugo Rast, who worked at Waldau in 1917 and 1918.

¹³ Morgenthaler, *Madness and Art*, pp. 25–26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁵ Wölfli, “A Short Life Story,” p. 121.