

# The Amazing Power of Art: Adolf Wölfli, an Artist Guided by His Soul

## Brief Summary

C.G. Jung would say of himself that the inner gates to his unconscious were wide open. This is common to all artists and to the mentally ill as well. Whether the ego is strong enough to contain and organize the flow of unconscious contents into orderly structures decides on the creative abilities of the person. For Jung as for most this is a gift of the gods as well as a curse. For some great artists it turned to the worst and they went definitely insane. For Jung, his instinctive recourse to play and to dialogues with his inner visions – a technique he later called active imagination - saved him from psychosis at the time of his great crisis in 1913 after his break with Freud.

Unlike these persons touched by the grace – or the curse – of inspiration from the unconscious, „normal,, people like you and me have another struggle. They struggle to *widen* the opening! So that the big challenge for me, when I practice intuitive painting, is not to contain the stream of energy from the unconscious but on the contrary to control my many fears, ambitions and reasonings of all sorts and prevent them from closing the door to the unconscious all together!

Adolf Wölfli belonged to those with the wide inner gates, but he could not control the doorway as well as Jung did. He was schizophrenic and never recovered. But he did have enough ego strength to translate his obsessions and inner torments into art forms: drawings, collages, writing, music compositions. His ceaseless creative activity enabled him to feel alive by giving him day by day solace and relief.

Brief account of his life course: born in 1864, last of 7 children. Father stone cutter, alcoholic, left the family when Adolf was 6. Mother washerwoman could not sustain the family. Adolf placed as contract child at a farmer's to work for food and lodging. Mother dies a year later. At 18 unhappy romance, broken up by parents of the girl. At 24 2 liaisons broken up. Takes to alcohol. At 26 attempts at sexual assault on 2 girls of 14 and 5. 2 years in prison. Violence, social isolation. At 31 3rd attempt at sexual assault on girl of 3 ½. Sent to clinic Waldau, diagnosed irresponsible, dangerous schizophrenic. In Waldau very difficult 1st years. violence in cell, towards guards and pat. 4 years later starts to draw with pencil, 8 years later turns to crayons. Starts to write and to compose music. Psychiatrist Morgenthaler supports him. When he publishes *Madness and Art*, AW is 57. Small circles interested buy pictures. AW has calmed down, pleased with the little fame and money. Dies in 1930 at 66. Had left 25'000 sheets of paper full of stories, life stories and music notations, 1'460 drawings and 1'560 collages.

Main themes of his pictures: falls, accidents, catastrophies, sins, punishments, crucifixions, executions, rapes, death and rescues, resurrections, help by women. [{pictures}](#). AW expresses his agonizing, terrifying experience of psychosis: overwhelming contents (memories, images, visions, voices), a dislocated, chaotic, frantic mind, multiple selves, sexual impulses, delirious expansion of body and mind.

How he proceeds: starts at the edges, works his way slowly towards the center. When the sheet is filled and coloured, goes on with writing and often music notations. It is an

obligation, automatic, dictated, hard work . Not by will: his soul is the guide in his search for structure, order, balance, unity, containment.. Every picture is a creation, no copies. He works in his cell on his own, all by himself, from morning to evening, 7 days a week, breaks only on Sunday afternoons. Refuses to work at the farm of the clinic.

Other themes: cities, buildings, trains, serpents (pictures). The most amazing works are his mandalas, pictures of wholeness and harmony born of diversity (pictures).

Art was obviously Wölfli's rescue. It was creating or surviving as a living dead, he had no choice. Art enabled him to express his anguish, to contain his terror, to evoke his visions and desires, to endure the unending pressure of his inner tensions and the curse of utter loneliness. Art did not heal him. The wounds were obviously too deep and the guilt too great. His works show no psychic development, or individuation, just a lessening of tension. But his art was nevertheless the only thing that could bring him his soul back.

For us viewers his art is a gift, as timeless as religious iconography of all times and cultures. Some 100 years later it moves us as it moved his very first admirers, a few nurses, psychiatrists and other interested people. We are deeply moved at the sight of his never ending torments and his struggle for psychic wholeness, and we feel surprisingly close to his longing for beauty, relief, innocence and immensity. This strong but diffuse emotional impact is what true art can do to us – says C.G. Jung. This experience he called „numinous“ or „archetypal“, in the sense that its power is beyond comprehension and reaches out to our sense of an existential mystery, an experience that lets us feel connected not only to Adolf Wölfli but to all humankind – and possibly even to the universe.

A.W. was by the way finally recognized as a full grown artist only 20 years after his death when Jean Dubuffet, a French painter, who was looking for natural, instinctive forms of art, discovered his works and started to collect art works of the mentally ill. He coined the term „Art Brut“, translated into „Outsider Art“ and made A.W.'s art known in the large public.

I found a few lines by a Swiss author, Adolf (!) Muschg, that sound like a Japanese haiku and for me render best this ungraspable, precious feeling given by true art, of a something beyond the reality of our senses. What Muschg wrote about literature surely applies to all art :

„Now  
we can start to read him  
for  
the  
key to him  
is as lost  
as we are.“

Lucienne Marguerat, July 26, 2013