

Ugo Rondinone and giants of Swiss art in conversation in Geneva

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Ugo Rondinone has created imagined 'reconstructions' of apartments for artists
Ferdinand Hodler . . .



. . . and Félix Vallotton © Stefan Altenburger
Photography Zürich

The Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone has taken over the Museum of Art and History in Geneva, drawing extensively from the institution's rich holdings for an exhibition called *when the sun goes down and the moon comes up*. He has delved into the collection of the museum, which dates from 1826, interspersing his own works with more than 300 historic items, from early 20th-century drawings by Adolphe Appia to 18th-century timepieces. Key works by two Swiss artists, Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918) and Félix Vallotton (1865-1925), are also included, creating a three-way conversation with Rondinone and his predecessors about love, desire and the complexities of the human condition.

The sprawling exhibition encompasses 13 rooms in a wing of the institution. On one side, visitors can see works by Hodler, including his large-scale warrior images such as *"Guerrier à la hallebarde"* (1895-96) and lake views, along with his sketches of his dying mistress Valentine Godé-Darel. On the other side are nudes, landscapes and still-lives by Vallotton. Rondinone focuses on the opposing drives of Eros and Thanatos (mythical personifications of life and death).

“Hodler and Vallotton represent contradictory, codependent and complementary views of 19th-century movements that led to the first 20th-century art movements,” says Rondinone. “While Hodler’s symbolism has his foot in the past, Vallotton’s post-Impressionism marks the beginning of Modernism.” It is the first time that the two “giants of Swiss art” have been brought together in such an exhibition. This duality frames the exhibition; the symmetry of the show matters, from its layout in two halves to the switching from upbeat elements to darker aspects of existence.



Ferdinand Hodler’s large-scale warrior images occupy a gallery © Stefan Altenburger



One room is dotted with sculpted glass horses by Rondinone partly filled with water drawn from different oceans © Stefan Altenburger

Hodler and Vallotton are also given their own homes in the show. These fictional “reconstructions” of apartments, co-created by Rondinone and the architect Frédéric Jardin, are a highlight. Hodler’s domestic abode brims with porcelain pieces, Tarot cards and watches drawn from the collection. Decorations on the drapery and wallpaper are inspired by drawings of male figures uncovered by Rondinone in the museum collection. There are also invented mischievous vintage images of Hodler looking happy with a male companion.

“Both men were known to be heterosexual,” says Marc-Olivier Wahler, the museum’s director. “But Ugo thinks they could also have liked men in a fluid way, especially when you see the fascination Hodler has for masculine figures. The same goes for Vallotton in a certain way.”

Some visitors may miss the exhibition’s secret rooms, accessible only through a “magic door” which opens when approached. This hidden enclave of rooms also plays on the idea of light and shade. Rondinone’s glass clocks in the first secret room are a cascade of colour, while the second room — containing a huge sculpted locked door surrounded by 16th-century helmets — explores the “power of obscurity”, according to a curatorial statement (in the pitch black gallery the eyes deceive, forming strips of light).

At every turn in the Hodler apartment, little-known but important works, such as Carlos Schwabe's early 20th-century series of sketches showing an anguished female muse, catch the eye. It is all a clever twist on the *garçonnière*, the fin-de-siècle term for a residence where extramarital affairs were conducted.



Sculptures by Ugo Rondinone are placed in a gallery of medieval weaponry

© Stefan Altenburger



Nudes by Félix Vallotton © Stefan Altenburger

Uplifting elements of the show include a room dotted with sculpted glass horses by Rondinone partly filled with water drawn from different oceans; these poised animals are shown alongside

Hodler's tranquil depictions of Lake Geneva and Lake Thun and — just like the lakescapes — the half-full horses form their own watery horizons. Hodler submitted works for the Swiss National Exhibition in 1896, so the Rondinone show could be seen as a meditation on what it means to be Swiss, with all three artists shaping and reflecting national identity. "Switzerland doesn't have an explicit identity," Wahler says, "whereas the French are defined by *égalité, fraternité* and *liberté*. Similar ideas apply in England. Switzerland is more like a frame — it can be described as being like negative space."

Rondinone is known for his vividly coloured stacked stone sculptures, which have popped up in locations worldwide such as the Ras Abu Aboud beachfront near Stadium 974 in Doha, Qatar. In 2007, he represented Switzerland at the Venice Biennale along with Urs Fischer and recently teamed up with the Swiss tennis superstar Roger Federer. The sculptor transformed the 20-time Grand Slam winner into a flying figure for his *burn shine fly* exhibition at last year's Venice Biennale (Federer was placed in a harness in his underwear during the modelling process.)



Rondinone's 'the sun' (2017) © Tadzio

Rondinone's works anchor the Geneva show throughout, including his vast circular sculptures, *the sun* (2017) in bronze and *the moon* (2022) in silver, which act as a gateway to the different rooms. The latter leads visitors into a gallery of medieval weaponry where Rondinone's languorous nude hyper-real human sculptures, fashioned from wax and soil, rest against the display cases. Still lifes and landscapes by Vallotton, such as *Paysage à Vence* (1924), are reframed in this setting, giving these disquieting paintings a new, life-affirming quality.

Rondinone is the third person to participate in *the Open Invitation XL* series, which has given prominent creative figures free rein to reinterpret and present the wide-ranging collection under Wahler. Viennese artist Jakob Lena Knebl and art historian Jean-Hubert Martin were the first two practitioners given this carte blanche. Belgian artist Wim Delvoye is working on the next *Open Invitation XL* iteration, followed by the US sculptor Carol Bove.

Wahler is keen to reinvent the museum for modern audiences, dismantling the idea that such august institutions are, as he once called them, "ivory towers". "I think this exhibition is a good example of what could be done in the future; the way presumed opposites work together and new interpretations appear."