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Adolf Wölfli:  
Master of  
His Universe

by Edward M. Gomez



The mystery of the legendary, "self-taught" artist Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930)—of his life, creativity, ambition and mind—is inseparable from his unusual art's allure. The vastness and complexity of his densely layered oeuvre are daunting enough; even when—especially when—compared to the most prolific, intellectually



Photo: Adolf Wölfli Foundation

Adolf Wölfli  
(1864-1930)

oriented, academically trained artists' productions, what Wölfli created and the circumstances in which he developed his art can still seem unbelievable or freakish to those unfamiliar with its history, purposes or themes. Still, even viewers who know little about Wölfli's schizophrenia or the isolation in which he produced his sprawling opus can and do recognize—and have come to savor—the originality, richness and power of his imagination and what emerged from it over three decades of intense artistic activity.

**"Die Senner-Roose von Australien"**  
(**"The Herdsman- Rose of Australia"**), 1911; from *From the Cradle to the Grave*, Book 4, page 361; pencil and colored pencil on newsprint, 40 x 29 inches. Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Kunstmuseum Bern. Photo: Adolf Wölfli Foundation.



(Text continued, page 3)

(Continued from page 1)



**Wölfli, with his cardboard horn, examining his drawings in his room at Waldau.**

*Photo: Collection of Adolf Wölfli Foundation,  
Kunstmuseum Bern*



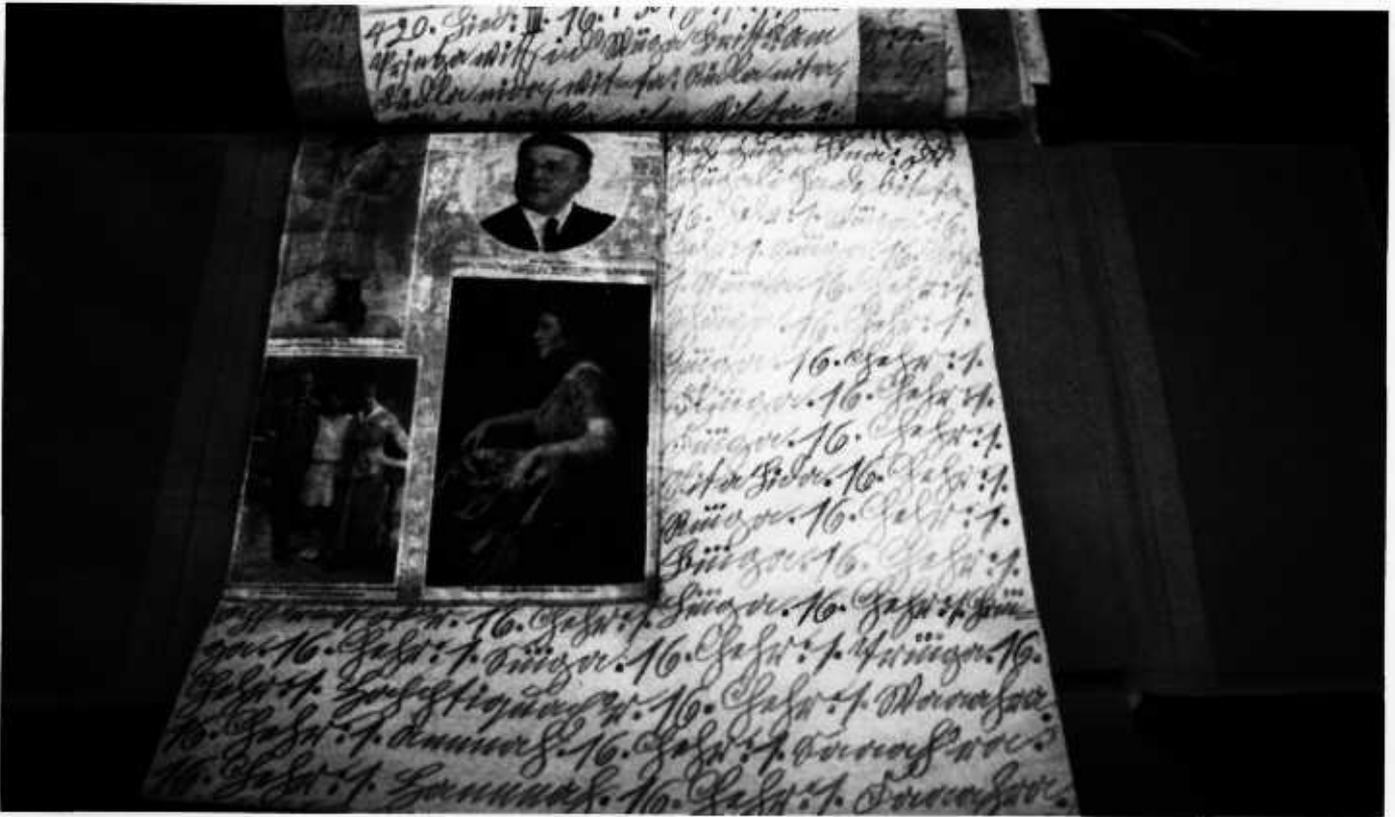
**“Insel Formoosa in Indischen Ozean” (“Formoosa Island in the Indian Ocean”),**  
 1914; pencil and colored pencil on paper, 27.63 x 39.38 inches. Collection of David Byrne and Adelle Lutz.  
*Photo: Courtesy of the collectors and American Folk Art Museum.*

With his 45 handmade, illustrated books (totaling some 25,000 pages) and hundreds of individual drawings, Wölfli long ago secured a special place in the canon of classic, European *art brut*. There, he and his work loom large, just as they do in the broader line-up of outsider artists of other eras and genres whose renowned accomplishments also have helped define and shape the field. (Among them: Carlo Zinelli, Aloise Corbaz, Heinrich Anton Müller, Martín Ramirez, Howard Finster, Bill Traylor and Henry Darger, to name a few.)

That artworks as enigmatic and deeply personal as Wölfli's have attracted an ever-growing following may suggest that their style, looks or subjects have struck a chord in tune with popular tastes. Or perhaps, in an international art world and in an age of global, corporate-driven pop culture whose products are often as soulless as they are dismissible, both art institutions and a fickle public finally have caught up with Wölfli—with the poetic vision, craftsmanship, integrity and irrepressible sense of aspiration that his work reflects.

### **From farmlands to mental asylum**

The hardscrabble early years of Wölfli's life profoundly affected his worldview and his psychological make-up. That formative period also indelibly influenced and is reflected in his art. Wölfli grew up in Bern, Switzerland's capital, a tidy city of cobblestone streets and arcaded stone buildings that dates back to medieval times. Wölfli's father Jakob was a stonecutter, a poor, sometimes abusive alcoholic who abandoned his family when Adolf, his youngest child, was five years old. Wölfli's mother Anna



**Pages 2492 and 1493, Song 420, of *Funeral March***, featuring collaged magazine images of elegantly attired ladies and gentlemen. This image shows how Wölfli's handmade, bound volumes are stored today, in protective, collapsible slipcases.

Photo © 2003 Edward M. Gomez

went to work as a washerwoman to support her children; after she fell ill in 1872, she and Adolf retreated to their hometown of Schangnau in the farmlands surrounding Bern.

There, Anna and her son were separated and sent to labor at different family-owned farms in exchange for food and lodging. As wards of the village at the mercy of strict Swiss "poor laws," their lives were miserable. Shortly after their return to the countryside, Anna died, and her son was devastated; for the eight-year-old Adolf, the

loss was irreparably traumatic. It was the kind of catastrophic event that he would later evoke in his art with a sense of impending doom. In a 1976 essay, the well-known Swiss art historian and curator Harald Szeeman observed that Anna Wölfli's death was the event that marked the beginning of her son's career of drifting, petty crime, hospitalization and "looking back on his life that [he thought] had not been worth living." Szeeman suggested that Wölfli's search for himself—or the creation of his identity—was rooted in "the chaos" of this unforgettable event. It accounted, Szeeman said, for "the dramatic anger of the shocked narrator" of the expansive tale told through art that Wölfli would spend three decades elaborating, and for the fact that its overall character and story lines are marked by a sense of shifting

extremes. Throughout Wölfli's magnum opus, Szeeman noted, there is "no catastrophe without an idyll and no idyll without a catastrophe." (1)

After his mother's death, Wölfli continued working as a hireling, usually for families that abused or ignored him, but he was an intelligent child and he did well in school. He completed his basic education, then worked as a farm-worker and handyman. In his late teens he fell in love with a country girl, but her parents forbade Wölfli from seeing their daughter. For the young Adolf, this second personal loss was deeply debilitating. Like his mother's death, it was a life-shaping, emotional-psychological blow.

During the next few years, the lonely Wölfli completed his compulsory military service, twice attempted to sexually molest young girls and ultimately served a two-year prison sentence for the

second of those offenses. Wölfli's life became even more of a struggle after his release from prison, as steady work became harder to find. Then, after a third attempt to molest a girl, he was apprehended again.

As a result, medical examiners at the Waldau Mental Asylum (later to become the Psychiatric Clinic of the University of Bern) interrogated Wölfli. They learned that he had known and understood that attempted sexual assault was wrong but that, as he explained, his misbehavior had been a reaction to his rejection by the parents who had forbidden him to see their daughter. "I became downcast, even melancholy, and was at my wit's end," Wölfli said of his failed romance in an autobiographical statement that he wrote when he was later admitted to the Waldau hospital. "I rolled in the snow and wept for the happiness so cruelly snatched from me... my heart had suffered too much." (2)

Officials at Waldau found Wölfli to be schizophrenic and mentally incompetent. In 1895, at the age of 31, he left the world of farm work, rural customs and everyday relationships and took up residence at Waldau, where he would spend the remaining 35 years of his life.



### An artist emerges

Wölfli suffered from hallucinations and was aggressive and violent during his first four years of confinement. However, around 1899, after he was transferred to a private cell and began to draw, his demeanor changed. He appeared calmer whenever he worked on his drawings but he behaved more aggressively during periods of idleness.



## A Home for Wölfli's Treasures

At the Waldau psychiatric hospital, where Adolf Wölfli produced his voluminous oeuvre, Dr. Walter Morgenthaler played a key role in setting up a museum to hold and display patients' art. After Wölfli's death in 1930, his books and other works—the bulk of what he had produced, minus hundreds of "bread art" drawings that had been sold—languished there in storage.

The works by which the French painter Jean Dubuffet and other well-known modern artists and thinkers learned about Wölfli in the 1940s and 1950s were his "bread art" drawings. They enthusiastically embraced such *art brut* ("raw art") made by non-academically trained, often isolated artists, creations that appeared to be unaffected by conventional cultural influences. They exhibited and promoted it in Europe.

In 1972, the Swiss curator Harald Szeeman directed documenta 5, the international art exposition in Kassel, West Germany. For that event, Szeeman and the Swiss psychiatrist Theodor Spoerri, who had been associated with Waldau and was interested in art made by psychotics, organized a Wölfli exhibition. That important show brought a new wave of attention to his art and helped lead to the establishment of the Adolf Wölfli Foundation's archives at the Kunstmuseum Bern, in 1975, three years after Dr. Spoerri's death.

His Bulgarian-born widow, Elka Spoerri (1924-2002), who had shared her husband's interest in Wölfli's art, became the first director/curator of the archives. Elka Spoerri, who died last year, spent three decades investigating the structure, narrative content, iconography and development of Wölfli's art. She wrote definitive essays, lectured in Europe and the U.S., and oversaw numerous exhibition and book-publishing projects based on her and her collaborators' research.

With Daniel Baumann, the Wölfli archives' current director, Elka Spoerri co-curated "The Art of Adolf Wölfli: St. Adolf-Giant-Creation," a historic exhibition of drawings from the artist's illustrated books (and other works) for the American Folk Art Museum in New York, where it was on view earlier this year. ■

In 1907 Wölfli was fortunate to meet Dr. Walter Morgenthaler (1883-1965), a psychiatrist who had begun working at Waldau and would do so off and on until 1919. Morgenthaler took a special interest in Wölfli's illness and in his art-making, which he encouraged. This led to the doctor's writing and publishing, in 1921, of *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler* (literally, "A Mentally Ill Patient as Artist," published in English as "Madness and Art: The Life and Work of Adolf Wölfli"; note that the German word *Geist* can refer to both the mind and the spirit, a point of semantic nuance that has a certain poetic resonance here). Morgenthaler's ground-breaking book for the first time recognized a mentally ill patient's creative production as art and a schizophrenic as an artist. In citing Adolf Wölfli by name, it acknowledged his identity—and his humanity—and broke with the tradition of referring to cases of mental illness merely with such scientifically cool labels as "Patient A" or "Patient B."

"Every Monday morning Wölfli is given a new pencil and two large sheets of unprinted newsprint," Morgenthaler wrote. "The pencil is used up in two days; then he has to make do with the stubs... [H]is thought, like his method of working, is rather without beginning or end. He almost never takes a break; as soon as one sheet is finished, he immediately begins another, ceaselessly writing and drawing." The doctor added that twice a week Wölfli was given "a ration of chewing tobacco because he always needed a 'chew' in his mouth when he worked." (3)

A year after Morgenthaler's



**Wölfli in his Waldau room, with a stack of his thick, hand-bound, illustrated books in the foreground.**

*Photo: Collection of Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Kunstmuseum Bern*

book came out, the German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn published *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* ("The Artistry of the Mentally Ill"), an examination of his collection of works made by patients at mental asylums in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Italy. In this pioneering

study, Prinzhorn looked at their creations as works of art and not merely as curiosities made by social outcasts.

Morgenthaler was aware that Wölfli had begun making illustrated, bound volumes. He also encouraged him to make single-sheet drawings



**“Santta-Maria-Burg-Riesen-Traube: Unitif Zohrn Tonnen schwer” (“Saint-Mary-Castle-Giant-Grape: Unitif Zohrn Heavy Tons”),** 1915; from *Geographic and Algebraic Books*, Book 13, page 75; pencil and colored pencil on newsprint, 28.75 x 41.25 inches. Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Kunstmuseum Bern. Photo: Adolf Wölfli Foundation.

for sale beyond the confines of Waldau so that Wölfli could afford to purchase pencils, paper and tobacco. He dubbed such works “Brotkunst” (“bread art,” or pieces made as income-generating jobs). At the psychiatric hospital, Morgenthaler was also instrumental in setting up a museum to house artworks made by resident patients. That facility was open to psychiatrists and special visitors.

What Morgenthaler could not foresee or comprehend, however, given the timing and the limited length of his involvement in Wölfli’s life at Waldau, were the scope and the complexity of the *magnum opus* the artist would ultimately produce during his long confinement there. Today, though, almost a century after Wölfli first began to draw, our

understanding of the structure of his vast, multifaceted oeuvre is much better informed. This knowledge owes everything to the painstaking research about his life and art that the late Elka Spoerri (1924-2002) led and conducted herself for nearly three decades. The founding director/curator of the Adolf Wölfli Foundation’s archives at the Kunstmuseum Bern, Spoerri was the art historian who first figured out and explained the hitherto unknown structure of the artist’s body of work. Her research made clear that Wölfli’s illustrated books, filled with texts and images, constituted a cohesive, narrative work made up of five consecutive, multi-volume parts. Spoerri also ascertained that Wölfli’s “bread art” drawings, while often themati-

cally or technically related to the contents of his books, had been produced as separate, stand-alone creations about which, incidentally, the artist had felt much less passionate than he had about his hefty tomes.



**Wölfli’s art =  
Wölfli’s world**

Sadly, although Waldau’s in-house museum eventually became the repository of the bulk of Wölfli’s production, his very first art-making efforts have not survived. His earliest extant drawings (made with plain pencil on newsprint) date from 1904-1905. Still, as Spoerri wrote in her last published essay, these works “form a

unified, well-defined group marked by high-quality draftsmanship and artistic vision. These drawings are the foundation of Wölfli’s art.” (4)

Only 49 of these seminal black-and-white images still exist. Several were included in “The Art of Adolf Wölfli: St. Adolf-Giant-Creation,” a historic exhibition presented at the American Folk Art Museum in New York earlier this year. Over the years, in her lectures and writings, Spoerri routinely asserted that “if Wölfli had not created anything else, these drawings would suffice to secure his place among the visionary artists of the 20th century.” (5)

In these early works, Wölfli introduced many of his signature motifs and enduring themes. Already visible in the two-panel “Assiisendes-Mit-tel-Landes” (“Assizes of



**“Das Kander-Thal in Berner Ober-land” (“The Kander Valley in the Bernese Oberland”), 1926;** pencil and colored pencil on paper, 18.5 x 24.38 inches. American Folk Art Museum. *Photo: AFAM.*

the Middle-Land,” 1904), for example, are the roller-coaster rhythms and the push-me-pull-you perspective of Wölfli’s densely packed pictorial space. Notable, too, are the deep, receding compartments, enclosed in ovals, arches or other escutcheon-like forms, that would form the building blocks of countless later compositions, with their churning, swirling rhythms. Ribbons of ornate pattern shoot dynamically

—often diagonally—across the picture plane, marking off main sections of an image; sometimes they link up with elements in an adjoining panel and continue into its pictorial space. Here, too, Wölfli’s seemingly anonymous, mustachioed round faces (actually, they are often self-portraits), like so many protruding dots on an elaborately frosted cake, pop up in the decorative section dividers and recesses of each image, their expressions blank, leering or ambiguous.

Wölfli rendered the varied tones of his earliest pictures, from delicate grays to dark black, with masterful control, both in shaded, solidly filled-in areas and in dotted

or cross-hatched sections. He integrated purely abstract forms into these early images, too. Blank, six-line musical staves are the most obvious of these forms; free, for now, of any musical notation, their emptiness contrasts sharply with the thickets of precisely drawn pattern mixed with illustrated scenes that fill these early works from corner to corner and offer evidence of a *horror vacui* tendency. (Such “fear of emptiness,” or the compulsion to fill all the surface area of a sheet or canvas—all of a two-dimensional image’s pictorial space—is common in schizophrenics’ artworks, or in what has also been called “psychotic art.” In general,



**Wölfli playing his handmade, cardboard horn. Were the sounds the artist made with this simple instrument some of the same music that he composed and notated in his drawings?**

*Photo: Collection of Adolf Wölfli Foundation,  
Kunstmuseum Bern*

such work is not characterized by much stylistic development, but Wölfli's demonstrably was and is; some of his later images do not reflect a space-filling obsession but feel modern and even minimalist in their relative sparseness.)

Throughout Wölfli's work, autobiographical references abound. In "Assiisen-des-Mit-tel-Landes," a girl or young woman in the upper right-hand corner of the right panel lifts her skirt to expose her genitals. She is an allusion to the young females whom Wölfli had attempted to molest. In "Sonnen-Uhr" ("Sundial"), the second panel of the four-part "Sonnenring" ("Sun Ring," 1905), a baby boy (Wölfli) appears sitting upright in a cradle, his arm dangling over its side, while beneath him in the composition, a female figure lies face up within an oddly shaped frame (his dead mother Anna, in her open coffin?). In this long, horizontal drawing's third panel, "Bernser-Ober-Land" ("Bernese Oberland"), Wölfli fondly evoked his rural "Heimat," that special place on the map and in the heart which, despite all the hardship he had experienced there, always beckoned him back as "home." A squarish white cross (from Switzerland's national flag) adorns the top of the picture, while the incompletely spelled-out name of the village Schangnau, written in the ornamental block letters Wölfli used to identify or comment upon his subject matter, appears below.

Other important motifs that emerge in these early black-and-white drawings include concentric-circle, mandala-like forms and, tucked away almost invisibly in the corners, crannies and negative spaces of his compositions, Wölfli's



ASSISENDES MIT



TELLANDES 1904

(preceding image, pages 10 and 11)

**"Assiisen-des-Mit-tel-Landes"**  
 ("Assizes of the Middle-Land"),  
 1904; pencil on newsprint; two-sheet  
 composition, each panel 39.5 x 29.5 inches.  
 Adolf Wölfli Foundation,  
 Kunstmuseum Bern.

Photo: Adolf Wölfli Foundation.

variously sized, abstract snail and bird forms. Their dots or slits for eyes provide subtle clues to their presence. With his pencil, Wölfli also wrote brief descriptive phrases or sentences in the pictorial space of his drawings. His words usually describe or explain their subject matter. This visible language, as it is



**"Heiligenrein-Skt. Adolf-Thurm"** ("Holy St. Adolf Tower"), 1919; pencil and colored pencil on paper, 30.5 x 22.25 inches. American Folk Art Museum. Photo: AFAM.

known in graphic-design terms, would remain a distinctive aspect of Wölfli's artwork throughout his career. By 1907, Wölfli had begun using colored pencils, too, a medium he routinely used to make his "bread art" pictures, which he drew on brighter, better-quality drawing paper. He also wrote explanations of those single-sheet works on their reverse sides.

Wölfli was a superb colorist, whose palettes, from drawing to drawing, were inventive, cohesive and richly expressive, as in the "bread art" piece "Heiligenrein-Skt. Adolf-Thurm" ("Holy St. Adolf Tower," 1919), with its strong, symmetrical design and bright primary hues. His color is one of the most powerful aspects of his work, popping right off the paper in his "bread art." It is the jewel-like embellishment of page after page of his illustrated books. In a rare, mural-size work like "Der San Salvathor" ("The San Salvador," 1926), which at first glance resembles a large, ornately patterned Persian carpet, Wölfli's color electrifies the concentric ovals at its vibrant center that are filled with large, reddish birds and the watchful

faces of dark-skinned angels with leafy headdresses and shield-like wings.



### The narrative work begins

In 1908, after Morgenthaler's arrival at Waldau, Wölfli embarked upon the far-reaching narrative work that would become the centerpiece of his artistic production. It would grow to contain poems, prose texts, musical compositions, illustrations, collages and arithmetical calculations. Today, the bulk of Wölfli's prolific output is housed at the Adolf Wölfli Foundation's archives in the Kunstmuseum Bern, the Swiss capital's fine arts museum. There, over the years, Spoerri and her collaborators allowed a selection of pages from Wölfli's big, fragile books to be removed for study, conservation and display. (Many such rarely seen pages, which had never before been shown in the United States, were featured in the American Folk Art Museum's exhibition this year.)

Wölfli's narrative work is comprised of five separate, multi-volume sections. Like Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, it is sprawling, multi-layered and steeped in its author's real-life experiences and perceptions, which he transformed into a fantastic-fictional document. *From the Cradle to the Grave* (1908-1912), Wölfli's imaginary autobiography, comes first; in it, he recounts the globe-trotting travels of an alter-ego child named Doufi (a diminutive of "Adolf"). Doufi's fantastic voyage takes place at a more innocent time before the author-protagonist lost his mother and became a foster child. Friends, family members and

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This image, found on page 3154, accompanies Song 791 of *Funeral March*. It features an advertisement for Hoover vacuum cleaners that was clipped from a magazine and pasted onto the page.

Photo © 2003 Edward M. Gomez

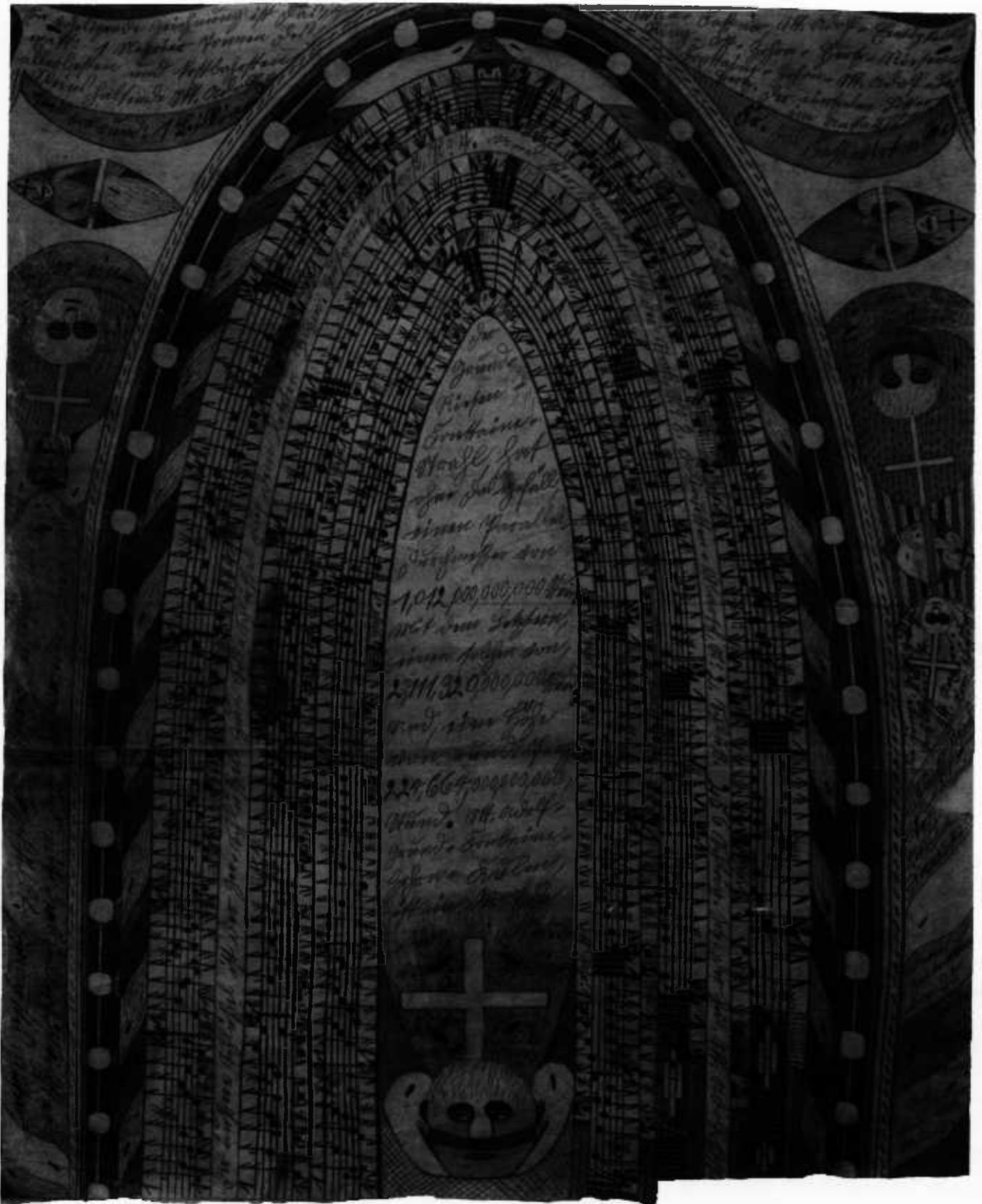
representatives of an outfit called the Swiss Hunters and Nature Explorers Traveling Society venture with Doufi to such exotic destinations as Virginia, Greenland, Australia and Africa.

Next, in the *Geographic and Algebraic Books* (1912-1916), Wölfli tells a self-centered, origin-of-the-universe myth. It is the tale of St. Adolf-Giant-Creation, which culminates in the emergence of the artist's omnipotent, alter-ego god-head, St. Adolf II. In this story, the child Doufi amasses a fortune in charity donations sent to him out of sympathy for the misfortunes he

has suffered. Doufi buys up the lands he had visited earlier and initiates ambitious construction projects. The Swiss Hunters and Nature Explorers become the Giant-Travel-Avant-Garde and, with Doufi, set off on celestial journeys in which Doufi/Wölfli crosses paths with assorted deities. Doufi/Wölfli becomes "St. Adolf II, Couscous King and Great-Great-God," a divine being from whom the creation of the universe emanates, as in Neoplatonism and many classic, origin-of-the-world myths. Wölfli introduced his number pictures (depicting calculations of

the accrued interest on Doufi's wealth) and music pictures (consisting mostly of musical notation) in the pages of the *Geographic and Algebraic Books*.

Between 1917 and 1922, Wölfli developed the third section of his grand story, the *Books with Songs and Dances*. Its themes, as its title suggests, are musical. After all, Wölfli regarded himself as both a composer and an artist, and he did not hesitate to assert this sense of his identity. (Morgenthaler knew that Wölfli regarded himself an artist and that he desired to show his work publicly.) In his cell at the



**"Der Grund. Riesen-Fontaine-Strahl"** ("The Ground, Giant-Fountain-Stream"), 1913; from *Geographic and Algebraic Books*, Book 11, page 884a, b; colored pencil on paper, 37 x 29.5 inches. Collection of Robert M. Greenberg. Photo: Courtesy of the collector and American Folk Art Museum.

Waldau hospital, Wölfli played a homemade, cone-shaped cardboard horn. As early as 1905, in the third panel ("Bern-er-Ober-Land") of "Sonnenring," the German word "Komponist" ("composer") appears in block letters. In 1906, in a letter to his brother sent from Waldau, Wölfli signed off with a typically confident declaration: "Drawn by Adolf Wölfli. Composer. This letter should be printed. Show this letter to your teacher." (6)

The *Books with Songs and Dances* are filled with marches, mazurkas, songs and polkas that bear women's names as their titles or names that Wölfli made up. They revisit episodes from Wölfli's earlier tales. In a boastful celebration of St. Adolf's achievements, for example, he honors the "useful and advantageous inventions" that his omnipotent alter ego has brought forth "for all the people of the entire and whole creation." A list of 187 such divine innovations includes: "4. The telephone, 5. The rubber tire, 6. Satan's Boat, 7. The torpedo... 17. The St. Adolf-brake, 18. The dynamo-machine... 80. The St. Adolf-hiking-watch... 86. The St. Adolf-God-Father-ring... 132. The lamb-ring, 133. The zenith-ring... 174. The Windanna ring, 175. The almighty-shovel, 176. The almighty-fork, 177. The almighty-spoon, 178. The almighty-knife... 180. The almighty-bird... 185. The St. Adolf-rotation-machine, 186. The chimes of Hell."

The New York-based art dealer Phyllis Kind, a pioneering promoter of Wölfli's work in the U.S. who has been deeply involved with his art since the 1970s, notes: "It's worth keeping in mind, for all the



**Snippets of the Bern region's vowel-rich, Swiss-German dialect, which Wölfli spoke, as well as phonetic rhymes and instructions for making solfège-like sounds, turn up in the *Books with Songs and Dances*. To date, musicologists still have not deciphered Wölfli's musical-notation system, although some European musicians have attempted to decode what appear to be rhythmic patterns in his scores.**

grandiose statements Wölfli makes about his—St. Adolf's—wealth and power, that he's still stuck in a mental asylum; this is one of the contradictions that makes Wölfli's work so fascinating."

Snippets of the Bern region's vowel-rich, Swiss-German dialect, which Wölfli spoke, as well as phonetic rhymes and instructions for making solfège-like sounds, turn up in the *Books with Songs and Dances*. To date, musicologists still have not deciphered Wölfli's musical-notation system, although some European musicians have attempted to decode what appear to be rhythmic patterns in his scores. How is his

music to be performed and on what kinds of instruments? What should it sound like? Most likely, we will never know for sure.

### **A glorious requiem**

Wölfli's story-telling became more concise, but his music-writing continued to evolve in the fourth main section of his unfolding narrative, the *Album Books with Dances and Marches*. The texts in these eight volumes are dated 1924 and 1925, but "the drawings [found in them] are from 1927 and 1928, when Wölfli evidently bound them into albums and titled them." (7)

*Funeral March* (1928-1930) is the final part of Wölfli's huge narrative, of which sixteen volumes exist today. A kind of euphoric requiem, its bold, jubilant character belies the sharp decline in physical health Wölfli experienced as he worked on it steadily, right up until his death. In *Funeral March*, Wölfli's elaborate, hand-drawn pictures gave way to almost minimalist collages laid out mostly on vertically positioned, two-page spreads. (The *Funeral March's* pages turn from bottom to top, as in a calendar.)

Wölfli clipped news and advertising photographs or illustrations of opera singers, young girls, alpine scenes, foreign places and wild animals from periodicals that were available to him at Waldau, such as *Über Land und Meer*, the *Illustrated London News* or even the American magazine *Life*. The ads he clipped and pasted into his books promoted such products or places as Kraft Cheese, Bon Ami household cleanser, Harrods department store in London and the Hotel Continental in Paris.

(In contemporary postmodernist critical terms, Wölfli employed a “strategy” of “appropriating” the thematic content and graphic qualities of the images he lifted; he used them for his own story-telling or artistic purposes, adapting, though not completely subverting, their original meanings. He “borrows or uses their emotion,” Spoerri said. (8))

Wölfli took a special interest in images of waterfalls, rivers, fires, wild animals and other symbols of nature’s unpredictable, unforgiving power. They reminded him of the pain and suffering naturally occurring calamities like floods or storms could inflict. Awareness of such disasters—for Wölfli, his beloved mother’s death counted as a big one—tempered his more sentimental depictions of a peaceful world. Works like “Campbell’s Tomato Soup” (from *Funeral March*, 1929), with its dapper young woman staring out to sea, feel romantic or dreamy. The emotion of “Zungsang-Skt. Adolf-Rosali von Grönland” (“Zungsang St. Adolf Rosali of Greenland,” from *Books with Songs and Dances*, 1917) is more bittersweet, for its images of Swiss alps, pretty girls and a fashionable matron both evoke and conflate Wölfli’s longing for his mother and his obsession with youthful, unrequited love. This collage made up of many borrowed images exudes a somewhat sinister air, too, for Wölfli knew that the majestic mountains it depicted were dangerous places where avalanches occurred. Similarly, Wölfli pasted photo clippings of a British mansion destroyed by fire onto page 2930 of the *Funeral March*; he was fascinated by the elegance and grandeur such build-

ings represented—but also keenly aware of the vulnerability of so much of the “real” world beyond his—or St. Adolf’s—control.

All of the *Funeral March* volumes bear the signature “St. Adolf II.” Spoerri noted that Wölfli regarded the entire series, consisting of thousands of songs, as “a musical composition on a grand scale.” This rhythmic-vocal work is not written out in Wölfli’s usual musical notation but rather in nonsense words and phrases that emphasize and repeat prominent vowel sounds. (The entire work seems to be a vigorous exercise in solfège-like vocalizing.) Often those sounds pick up and play off of the names of the people or places, or of the brand names of products, that appear in the images Wölfli pasted down onto the pages (scores) of different songs. The even numbers 8, 16, 24 and 32 pop up regularly throughout *Funeral March*, as does the indecipherable, Swiss-German word-sound “chehr,” apparently to indicate rhythms and repeats. (“It’s hard rock. It’s rhythm without melody,” Spoerri once observed.) (9) Of this joyous work, in which Wölfli revisited his narrative’s earlier themes and celebrated the omnipotent St. Adolf’s awe-inspiring accomplishments, the artist said: “Everyone who knows anything about music will be able to play the march; it will be printed and it will bring in hundreds of thousands of francs.” (10)

As much—or as little—as we accurately comprehend about Wölfli’s *Funeral March*, as a form of musical expression and as a multidisciplinary work, it is unquestionably sophisticated in both its structure and its physical presenta-

tion. In a striking affinity with experimental musical scores of the 20th century—John Cage’s avant-garde works come to mind—*Funeral March*, like all of Wölfli’s musical compositions, can and should be viewed simultaneously as a technical exercise in notating musical sound (and, implicitly, instruction for its performance) and as a vivid work of visual art.

In these musical-visual-literary pages, musical texts (as well as verbal texts) and decorative or representational images are combined, just as texts and images (and, sometimes, musical notation) had been seamlessly integrated in medieval illuminated manuscripts. But in *Funeral March*, Wölfli replaced his earlier music pictures packed with notation and decoration with drawings/scores whose appearance instinctively emulates the uncluttered, modernist graphic design of the 1920s and 1930s. Here, his page layouts appear to offer more generous areas of white space, one of the hallmarks of that style. In fact, though, that “white space” is usually filled with the artist’s florid handwriting, which, in design terms, throughout his work, may be seen as an integral element of his compositions. (Wölfli wrote in Süttelin cursive script, whose long, narrow letterforms are unfamiliar to readers of modern German. Like the gothic type in which German-language books, newspapers and official documents were once printed, Süttelin largely died out by the 1940s.)

In *Funeral March*, Wölfli separated his songs with red colored-pencil lines that run horizontally across vertically positioned, two-page

spreads. "Even as he was creating, he was editing," Spoerri said. (11) He used a wide assortment of papers to make these volumes, from wrapping paper from parcels sent to the Waldau hospital to concert posters and custom-printed papers from bakeries and stores. Other distinguishing aspects of *Funeral March* include Wölfli's colored-pencil embellishments of certain collaged images from magazines (he added patterned borders, birds or figures) and his depictions of women. They appear as noble caretakers (conscientious mothers or homemakers in advertising pictures), or as "modern" females working in factories, or as symbols of idealized beauty (fashion models, actresses). Wölfli's women are often object-symbols of both his erotic and his filial yearnings.



**Raw creative energy  
—the essence of  
Wölfli's art**

Nowadays, even society's most isolated individuals—prisoners, mental-hospital patients, monks in self-imposed exile—are not completely "immune to artistic culture," as Jean Dubuffet's classic description of *art brut* said of its creators more than half a century ago. After all, today the most individualistic "outsiders" still live and operate within the realm of society, even if, by chance or by choice, they do so at its margins. By contrast, the isolated circumstances in which Wölfli lived and created his art, in an age and in a world that now seem very remote, were already extremely rare in his lifetime and perhaps are even rarer in the Internet era. Today, radios and



**"Riisen-Kannaari: 10 Meter Spann-Flügel-Weitte" ("Giant Canary: Wingspan 10 Meters"), 1913; from *Geographic and Algebraic Books*, Book 11, page 851; pencil and colored pencil on newsprint, 37.5 x 27.5 inches. Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Kunstmuseum Bern. Photo: Adolf Wölfli Foundation.**

televisions that connect individuals to society and the world have become ubiquitous appliances; mass-media messages, including those from advertising, are almost inescapable. Mentally ill persons' creativity can be said to face more control mechanisms, too, now that

most psychiatric hospitals have at least rudimentary art-therapy programs to engage patients (and direct their creative energies?). Nowadays, too, the use of antidepressants and other drugs to manage or ameliorate mental illnesses might affect the character



**“Der San Salvator” (“The San Salvador”),** 1926; pencil and colored pencil on newsprint, 59 x 82 inches. Williams Collection. Photo: Courtesy of the collectors and American Folk Art Museum.

and quality of a patient’s art-making, but who can say for sure?

Whatever the evolving circumstances of the “outsider” may be, Wölfli’s astonishing achievement seems to demonstrate that artistic genius can and does reside in individuals like himself, despite their afflictions. “Wölfli’s creativity absolutely allows itself to be judged independently of [his] illness,” wrote Jürgen Glaesemer, Elka Spoerri’s colleague and collaborator in

the 1980s at the Kunstmuseum Bern, in the Adolf Wölfli Foundation’s facsimile edition of *From the Cradle to the Grave* (S. Fischer Verlag, 1985).

Spoerri also concluded that Wölfli’s artistic talent had found expression as impressively as it did despite, not because of, his mental illness. At the same time, she believed, the effects of his schizophrenia—his fantastic delusions—had influenced and were reflected in his work. Ultimately, Wölfli overcame mental-health obstacles effectively enough to be able to produce the work he felt compelled to create. Moreover, he developed the means—a personal style; distinct visual, verbal and musical languages; unique visual forms—by which to do so.

“All artists coexist alongside a second self whom they beg their muse to help them find,” Kind says, suggesting that, for Wölfli, art-making provided a path or outlet for a search for self that he needed to pursue. Kind says, “Also consider the two very different parts of Wölfli that came together in his art. On the one hand, he was a miserable creature who might have undertaken his art-making as a way of getting away from his fears. On the other, he was a total braggart who showed off how extraordinary he could be—how extraordinary he *imagined* he could be.”

Wölfli’s art is unusual, to be sure. For some viewers, the fact that it defies easy classification,

along with the circumstances out of which it emerged—could a “simple” Swiss farmboy really produce historically meaningful art?—will forever brand it as an oddity. However, like Dubuffet and the surrealist André Breton in the 1940s, today many contemporary artists are inspired by what they recognize as the raw creative energy pulsing through Wölfli’s art. (That a new breed of “urban folk artists” who make a point of using found or recycled materials, reject dominant, art-market trends, and consciously try to emulate an “outsider aesthetic” has appeared in recent years bears witness to the influence and appeal of way-off-the-grid, technically innovative, historically singular visionaries like Wölfli.)

For those who respond to that energy, which propels St. Adolf on otherworldly journeys and fuels his megalomaniacal schemes, Wölfli’s world can be an emotionally high-charged, psychologically intense, sometimes forbidding place. That distinctive force—call it the power of the artist’s unfettered, outrageous vision—lies at the heart of Wölfli’s art. As it surges unstopably through every corner of the self-contained, alternative reality that he conjured up, it pulls viewers into the recesses of that world’s peculiar geography and into its dizzy whirlpools of exquisite pattern and color, all the while raising intriguing questions about the nature of artistic creativity itself. ■

## Notes:

(1) Harald Szeeman, “Keine Katastrophe ohne Idylle, keine Idylle ohne Katastrophe” (1976), in Elka Spoerri, ed., *Der Engel des Herrn im Küchenschurz* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1987), pp. 78-109. Excerpt translated by E.M. Gomez.

(2) Adolf Wölfli, “A Short Life Story” (1985), in Walter Morgenthaler, *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*, trans. by Aaron H. Esman with Elka Spoerri (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), pp. 111-121.

(3) Morgenthaler, pp. 21-23.

(4) Elka Spoerri, “Adolf Wölfli, Artist/Builder: A Consideration of His Life and Work,” in *The Art of Adolf Wölfli: St. Adolf-Giant-Creation*, catalog of the exhibition of the same name on view Feb. 25-May 18, 2003, at the American Folk Art Museum, New York (New York: American Folk Art Museum/Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 17.

(5) Elka Spoerri, “Adolf Wölfli: Writer, Poet, Draftsman, Composer,” in *Adolf Wölfli: Writer, Poet, Draftsman, Composer*, a collection of essays edited by Elka Spoerri (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 10.

(6) Charles Linsmayer, ed., *Schweizer Lesebuch* (Munich and Zürich: Piper, 1994) p. 123. Excerpt translated by E.M. Gomez.

(7) Elka Spoerri and Daniel Baumann, “St. Adolf-Giant-Creation: The Art of Adolf Wölfli,” *Folk Art*, winter 2002/2003 issue, p. 49. Published by the American Folk Art Museum, New York.

(8) Edward M. Gomez, “Adolf Wölfli: In the Archives,” *Raw Vision*, issue 18, spring 1997, pp. 28-33.

(9) Interview with the author at Adolf Wölfli Foundation archives, Bern, Switzerland, March 1995.

(10) Spoerri, “Adolf Wölfli: Writer, Poet, Draftsman, Composer,” p. 55.

(11) Interview with the author, March 1995.



**Edward M. Gomez** is a graphic designer, critic, journalist, educator and author whose books include

the first four volumes of the *New Design* series (Rockport Publishers) and the monograph *Roberto Cortázar* (Landucci), about Mexico’s leading contemporary figurative painter. A former staff reporter and writer for *TIME* in the U.S. and overseas, he grew up in Bern, Switzerland, where he became familiar with the cultural environment in which Wölfli made his art. Gomez writes for the *New York Times*, *Art & Antiques*, S.F. Gate (the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s Web site) and other publications, and is the U.S. contributing editor of *Raw Vision*. Fluent in several languages, in 1995 he received a Pro Helvetia (Swiss National Arts Council) research award for work at the Wölfli archives in Bern. His essay on graphic-design aspects of Wölfli’s art was published in the American Folk Art Museum’s “The Art of Adolf Wölfli: St. Adolf-Giant-Creation” exhibition catalog (2003).

## Adolf Wölfli's Forms

**W**ölfli developed a rich vocabulary of forms that he employed repeatedly and expressively throughout his work. His iconography is autobiographical, descriptive (documenting or referring to aspects of the world he knew) and symbolic (with certain motifs alluding to aspects of his vast narrative). Among these recurring forms:



One of Wölfli's self-depictions in the early drawings

A bird ornament, with feet, typically tucked away in the negative spaces of a drawing



A variant of Wölfli's "ring of bells" decorative border, whose shape recalls the rows of cowbells that adorn Swiss alpine farm buildings

Birds and bells combined in an ornate, decorative border



The letter H, placed horizontally, emerging out of the negative space of a drawing and linking neighboring sections of an image

## Exploring Wölfli's World

**T**o learn more about Adolf Wölfli's life and art, see the following books and resources:

*The Art of Adolf Wölfli: St. Adolf-Giant-Creation*, catalog of the 2003 exhibition at the American Folk Art Museum, with essays by Elka Spoerri, Daniel Baumann and Edward M. Gomez (AFAM/Princeton University Press). Available in stores, from Amazon.com and from the museum: AFAM Book & Gift Shop, 45 West 53rd St., New York NY 10019, tel. 212-265-1040.

*Raw Vision Outsider Art Sourcebook* (2003), available in stores and from [www.rawvision.com](http://www.rawvision.com).



*Adolf Wölfli: Writer, Poet, Draftsman, Composer*, collection of essays, edited by Elka Spoerri (Cornell University Press, 1997).

*Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*, by Walter Morgenthaler, translated by Aaron Esman, with Elka Spoerri (University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

*Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond*, by John Maizels (Phaidon, 1996)

*Collection de l'Art Brut* website: [www.artbrut.ch](http://www.artbrut.ch)

▲ **Above:** *The Art of Adolf Wölfli: St. Adolf-Giant-Creation*, catalog of the 2003 exhibition at the American Folk Art Museum.

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