The mystery of the legendary, "self-taught" artist Adolf Wölflı (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 oriented, academically trained artists' productions, what Wölflı 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 Wölflı'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 Wölflı Foundation, Kunstmuseum Bern.
Photo: Adolf Wölflı Foundation.

(Text continued, page 3)
Wölfl, with his cardboard horn, examining his drawings in his room at Waldau.

Photo: Collection of Adolf Wölfi Foundation, Kunstmuseum Bern
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 Ramírez, 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 stonemason, a poor, sometimes abusive alcoholic who abandoned his family when Adolf, his youngest child, was five years old. Wölfli’s mother Anna
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. He 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. Wölflis 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 Wölflis. 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,” Wölflis 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 Wölflis 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

Wölflis 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 Wölflis Treasures

At the Waldau psychiatric hospital, where Adolf Wölflis produced his voluminous oeuvre, Dr. Walter Morgenthaler played a key role in setting up a museum to hold and display patients’ art. After Wölflis 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 Wölflis 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 Wölflis exhibition. That important show brought a new wave of attention to his art and helped lead to the establishment of the Adolf Wölflis 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 Wölflis 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 Wölflis 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 Wölflis archives’ current director, Elka Spoerri co-curated “The Art of Adolf Wölflis: 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 Wölflı 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 Wölflı’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 Wölflı”; 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 Wölflı 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 Wölflı 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 Wölflı 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 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 Wölflı had begun making illustrated, bound volumes. He also encouraged him to make single-sheet drawings.
call/ 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.

Wolfli's art = Wolfli's world

Sadly, although Waldau’s in-house museum eventually became the repository of the bulk of Wolfli’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 Wolfli’s art.” (4)

Only 49 of these seminal black-and-white images still exist. Several were included in “The Art of Adolf Wolfli: 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 Wolfli 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, Wolfli introduced many of his signature motifs and enduring themes. Already visible in the two-panel “Assisen-des-Mit-tel-Landes” (“Assizes of...
"Das Kander-Thal in Berner Oberland" ("The Kander Valley in the Bernese Oberland"), 1926; pencil and colored pencil on paper, 18.5 × 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 Wölflis 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, Wölflis 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.

Wölflis 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,
such work is not characterized by much stylistic development, but Wölflis 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 Wölflis 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 Wölflia had attempted to molest. In "Sonnen-Uhr" ("Sundial"), the second panel of the four-part "Sonnenring" ("Sun Ring," 1905), a baby boy (Wolfli) 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, "Berner-Ober-Land" ("Bernese Oberland"), Wölflia 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 Wölflia 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, Wölflis
variously sized, abstract snail and bird forms. Their dots or slits for eyes provide subtle clues to their presence. With his pencil, Wolfli 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 known in graphic-design terms, would remain a distinctive aspect of Wolfli's artwork throughout his career. By 1907, Wolfli 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.

Wolfli 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 Salvator" ("The San Salvador," 1926), which at first glance resembles a large, ornately patterned Persian carpet, Wolfli'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, Wolfli 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 Wolfli's prolific output is housed at the Wolfli 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 Wolfli'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.)

Wolfli'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), Wolfli'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
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), Wölffli 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 godhead, 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/Wölffli crosses paths with assorted deities. Doufi/Wölffli 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. Wölffli 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, Wölffli developed the third section of his grand story, the *Books with Songs and Dances*. Its themes, as its title suggests, are musical. After all, Wölffli regarded himself as both a composer and an artist, and he did not hesitate to assert this sense of his identity. (Morgenthaler knew that Wölffli 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.
Waidau hospital, Wolfli played a homemade, cone-shaped cardboard horn. As early as 1905, in the third panel ("Berner-Ober-Land") of "Sonnenring," the German word "Komponist" ("composer") appears in block letters. In 1906, in a letter to his brother sent from Waidau, Wolfli signed off with a typically confident declaration: "Drawn by Adolf Wolfli. 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 Wolfli made up. They revisit episodes from Wolfli'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 Wolfli'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 grandiose statements Wolfli 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 Wolfli's work so fascinating."

Snippets of the Bern region's vowel-rich, Swiss-German dialect, which Wolfli 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 Wolfli'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
Wolfli'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 Wolfli evidently bound them into albums and titled them." (7)

Funeral March (1928-1930) is the final part of Wolfli'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 Wolfli experienced as he worked on it steadily, right up until his death. In Funeral March, Wolfli'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.)

Wolfli 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 Waidau, 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-St.Adlf-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 confute 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 buildings 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 presentation. 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 Sütotel 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, Sütotel 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. 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 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...
and quality of a patient's art-making, but who can say for sure?

Whatever the evolving circumstances of the "outsider" may be, Wölflis astonishing achievement seems to demonstrate that artistic genius can and does reside in individuals like himself, despite their afflictions. "Wölflis 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 Wölflis Foundation's facsimile edition of From the Cradle to the Grave (S. Fischer-Verlag, 1985).

Spoerri also concluded that Wölflis 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, Wölflis 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 Wölflis 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 Wölfl 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 imagined he could be."
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 Wolfli’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 Wolfli.)

For those who respond to that energy, which propels St. Adolf on otherworldly journeys and fuels his megalomaniacal schemes, Wolfli’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 Wolfli’s art. As it surges unstoppable 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:


(3) Morgenthaler, pp. 21-23.


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


(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 Wolfli 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 Wolfli archives in Bern. His essay on graphic-design aspects of Wolfli’s art was published in the American Folk Art Museum’s “The Art of Adolf Wolfli: St. Adolf-Giant-Creation” exhibition catalog (2003).
Adolf Wölflis Forms

Wölflis 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 Wölflis self-depictions in the early drawings
- A bird ornament, with feet, typically tucked away in the negative spaces of a drawing
- A variant of Wölflis "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 Wölflis World

To learn more about Adolf Wölflis life and art, see the following books and resources:


- Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond, by John Maizels (Phaidon, 1996)
- Collection de l'Art Brut website: www.artbrut.ch

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