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Autor: [s.n.]
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ADOLF WÖLFLI'S ART BRUT – CREATIVITY AND MADNESS



Over the last years traditional definitions of art and madness have disintegrated. Only lately has the work of *Adolf Wölfli* (1864–1930), a schizophrenic inmate for 35 years of the Psychiatric Clinic Waldau near Berne, gained art status, after being considered for decades a mere therapeutic occupation of an insane mental patient.

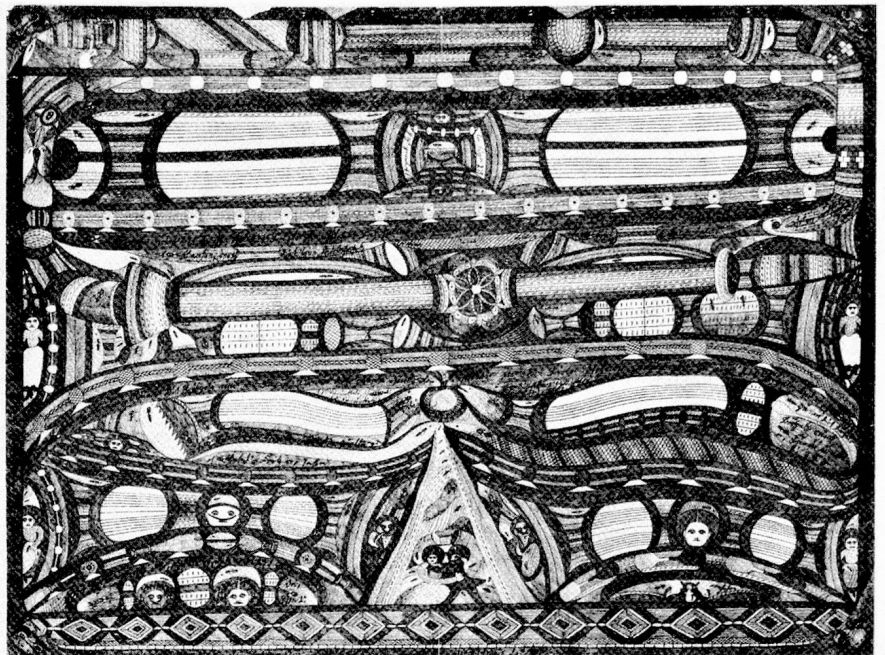
An itinerant farm labourer with no formal education, Adolf Wölfli began to draw in 1899 and continued to do so for the rest of his life — which was spent in a cell of a mental hospital.

The main body of his work consists of an enormous illustrated narrative depicting the travels of 'St. Adolt II', Wölfli's imaginary self. This fictional autobiography centres in Adolf Wölfli's sad childhood and explores the sexual fantasies from which Wölfli never freed himself, portraying the artist as both victim and transgressor and returning constantly to the theme of redemption. The elaboration of this private universe became an obsession and Wölfli covered 20,000 pages with a profusion of poems, drawings, texts and musical compositions (the first contemporary artist to include musical elements in his work). This subordination of word, image, number and musical notation to an ultimate design is the most striking feature of Wölfli's art, resulting in the creation of intricate and intensely rhythmic, decorative patterns which are reminiscent of mediaeval illuminated manuscripts.

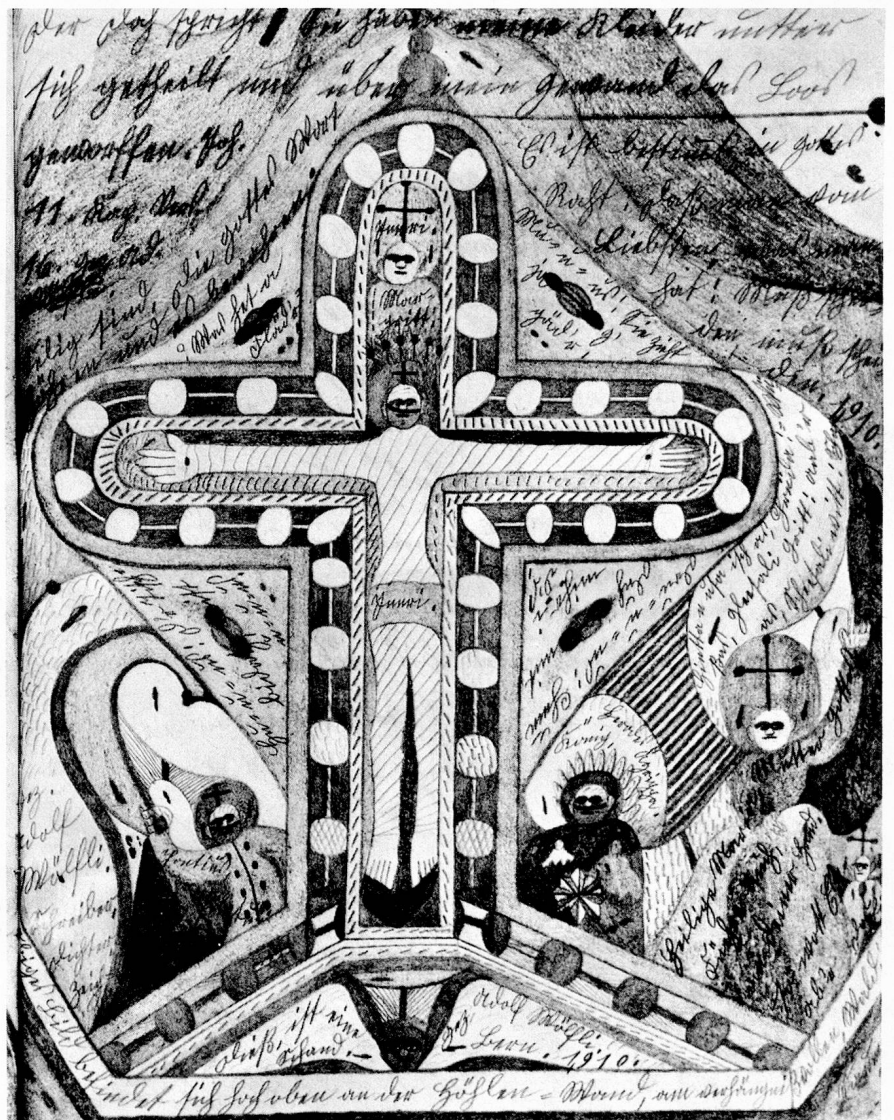
Wölfli's status as a "madman" may not allow us to accept his work simply as an object of aesthetic pleasure, but its visual coherence is nonetheless astonishing. Its impact is derived from the tension between its chaotic content and the ornamental sophistication of its form.

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(The pictures were contributed by courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, which held an exhibition of Adolf Wölfli's work from 10.5.—29.6.)



"Limonada Lina", 1904



"Crucifixion"