
Flaunting the Unfinished: *Non finito* as a Classicist Gesture in the Work of Ferdinand Hodler

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In the oeuvre of Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918) there is an unusual phenomenon. In several of his completed works, including some of his most important pieces, Hodler ostentatiously displayed lines resulting from the use of sighting and transfer grids as well as traces of other technical tools.¹ While other artists of Hodler's time considered the use of traditional devices such as the sighting grid or the Dürer pane to indicate deficient artistic ability, Hodler unashamedly admitted to using them and proudly showed them to visitors in his studio. Even more surprising, given the artist's perfectionism, is that he left traces of their use visible in some of his finished paintings. This article attributes Hodler's idiosyncratic flaunting of technical processes to his enthusiasm for Renaissance art, as revealed by numerous sources, including previously unpublished letters and accounts from his contemporaries. The central argument contends that Hodler used the traces of instruments that were particularly prevalent in the early modern period and the resulting impression of *non finito* to position himself in the tradition of the European Renaissance canon. Therefore, Hodler's work can be seen anew as an attempt at a modern form of classicism that has freed itself from narrative and anecdotal elements.

Hodler's Use of Technical Devices

Around 1900, Hodler was the most influential figure in Swiss painting. His art, which ranges from landscapes and portraits to large-format figurative paintings, was initially characterized by realism before he turned to symbolism in his later years. At the same time as Hodler was transitioning from realism to symbolism, he developed his concept of "parallelism," a specific compositional approach based on symmetry and repetition, with which the artist sought not only to enhance the impact of his works but also to reflect an inherent law of nature.

Whatever genre Hodler adopted, the use of technical aids distinguished his painting process. One common tool of the trade was the sighting grid, which served to capture the contours of a landscape or a sitter. Hodler himself wrote about his approach in a notebook from 1898: "One places the model directly behind the net, as close as

possible. . . . One must give the squares 10, 15, or 20 centimeters for whole figures. If you make them too small, there will be too many of them and the large number of squares will confuse the view. . . . One places oneself at the desired distance, which also depends on one's eyesight."² Hodler used the sighting grid not only in drawing but also in painting; thus, net-frame lines could be traced on portraits and figure or landscape paintings.

Another device Hodler regularly used was the glass panel—the so-called Dürer pane. He notes to his first biographer, Carl Albert Loosli:

One has occasionally admired the depth perspective of my pictures of Lake Geneva from Chexbres and Caux. It was in fact no more difficult to depict them correctly than any other distant perspective. For one thing, I got into the habit of seeing flat; for another, I used the Dürer pane on every occasion; it offers unmistakable, incorruptible fixed points and bases for this purpose. With the wide surface perspectives of large plains or steeply rising mountains, it is no different. The draftsman and the painter do not need more than the Dürer pane can give them.³

In addition to this, Hodler used devices such as a straightedge, plumb line, triangle, ruler, and compass as well as a rack made especially for him, with which he could measure a model to the precise centimeter in height and width.⁴ The artist applied compasses to trace certain measurements directly on the sitter's face; he then transferred them to the picture, which could lead to visible construction lines on the painting. Hodler's student Stéphanie Guerzoni reports that he told her: "Use the compass to measure the length of the nose, the width of the forehead, the distance between the eyes."⁵ Particularly relevant are the lines that emerged as a result of transfers. Hodler often applied the square grid to transmit a preparatory drawing or study to a painting as well as to enlarge or reduce the subject—a very common technique in the production of large-format paintings in European art.

Making Visible the Traces of Technical Tools

There is nothing unusual about harnessing technical tools to survey an object or to transfer a sketch onto a canvas. What is unusual, however, is how openly Hodler talked about using these devices and how much pride he seemed to take in their deployment at a time when many successful artists were celebrating more informal, loose gestures. As a student, he had written down his "Ten Commandments," declaring in the eighth, "The means to achieving precision are observation, comparison, and measurement." In the tenth commandment, he states: "To determine the exact measures, the human eye is not enough, and wherever there is the opportunity, the artist is well advised to make use of the mathematical instruments of measurement, namely the compasses, the straightedge, the triangle, the plumb line, and the ruler."⁶ This credo, declared in 1874, corresponds to a self-portrait from approximately the same year that shows the young painter with a striking pageboy haircut, a reference to the hair fashion of the sixteenth

century and thus to the Renaissance forebears.⁷ The student's right hand is raised to swear; in his left, he holds a triangle and a plumb line.

In later years, Hodler continued to insist on the importance of measurement when talking with colleagues about his methods. Guerzoni reports that one of his instructions was to "always measure, never rely on your eyes!"⁸ Loosli remarks that the artist's "everlasting commandment" was the dictum "observe, measure, compare!"⁹ German scholar Adolf Frey claims that Hodler drew his figures from the model "to the last square centimeter or even square millimeter."¹⁰ Other painters tended to regard a tool such as the sighting grid as an aid for the beginner or amateur. Hodler, in contrast, happily advertised his reliance on such equipment and even posed for photographs near it.¹¹

Even more surprising than Hodler's verbal endorsements of technical aids is that he sometimes left visible traces of these techniques in his finished figure paintings and portraits. The compositions sometimes reveal lines that were drawn when the artist applied the sighting grid or transferred cartoons to the canvas. Grid lines and transfer lines are often visible on paintings that originated as studies and only later were signed by Hodler as artworks in their own right. Lines visible to the naked eye appear in works from around 1890 and gradually increase from around 1910 onward. In an oil sketch for *View into the Infinite*, signed and dated 1916, Hodler seems to have intensified the lines at the end of the painting process without any functional reason for the reinforcement (fig. 1). The presence of auxiliary lines in works that originated as studies or preliminary drawings is, of course, expected in artistic practice of this period and can therefore hardly come as a surprise—although it would have been easy enough for the artist to paint over them when he allowed the painting to become a stand-alone work.

By contrast, it is highly unusual for such lines to be visible in works intended as final products from the outset. In Hodler's work, lines are visible to the unaided eye—for example, in the two versions of his large-scale composition *The Admired Young Man* from 1903, both of which were later revised by the artist. In the version revised in 1904, lines are discernible mainly near the young male figure, one of which runs horizontally through his navel (fig. 2). Horizontal and vertical transfer lines are also present in the monumental version of *Unanimity* from 1912–13, held in the collection of the Kunsthhaus Zürich, across the entire width of the picture (fig. 3); lines are seen in the two versions of *View into the Infinite* now in the collections of the Kunstmuseum Basel and the Kunsthhaus Zürich—especially in the latter, where they are pronounced next to the figure at the right edge of the picture (fig. 4).¹² Lines have a striking presence in the depiction of Hodler's deceased lover, Valentine Godé-Darel, from 1915. For months, Hodler had recorded the progression of her illness as she suffered from cancer, and eventually, her death, in countless drawings, oil sketches, and paintings.¹³ Of the three works that show Godé-Darel in overall view on her deathbed, the one that today belongs to the Kunstmuseum Solothurn most clearly shows a grid of lines, especially on the side of the mattress.



FIG. 1. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). Oil study for *View into the Infinite*, 1916, oil on canvas, 83 × 41.5 cm. CR no. 1649. Zurich, Kunsthhaus. Image: Kunsthhaus Zürich.



FIG. 2. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *The Admired Young Man*, 1903, revised 1904, oil and oil crayon on canvas, 213.5 × 288 cm. CR no. 1348. Zurich, Kunsthhaus. Image: Kunsthhaus Zürich.



FIG. 3. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *Unanimity*, 1912–13, oil on canvas, 3.3 × 10 m. CR no. 1496. Zurich, Kunsthhaus. Image: Kunsthhaus Zürich.



FIG. 4. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *View into the Infinite*, 1916, oil on canvas, 343 × 723 cm. CR no. 1594. Zurich, Kunsthhaus. Image: Kunsthhaus Zürich.

In some cases, auxiliary lines clear to the eye can also be found in portraits. For example, in the portrait of literary and art critic Josef Viktor Widmann from 1898, there are transfer and sighting grid lines (fig. 5). The work was described by the sitter's son, Fritz Widmann, as “not having reached its completion,”¹⁴ but his comment did not pertain to the visible lines. Rather, he was of the opinion that the portrait's resemblance to the sitter was not yet completely established. In a portrait of Hodler's wife, Berthe Hodler-Jacques, from the same year, a line of construction lies on the vertical central axis of the face, while two perpendicular construction lines extend across the eyes and mouth; faintly visible, a grid of transfer lines marks the background (fig. 6).

Overall, auxiliary lines are ostentatiously displayed only on a good handful of important figure paintings, an equal number of portraits, and several dozen oil studies that Hodler signed, elevating them to completion; there are many more paintings in which lines are faintly visible. In the vast majority of his paintings, however, Hodler made the lines disappear under new layers of paint; in his landscapes, they are invisible throughout, even though they often played a role in the painting process. Nevertheless, it is intriguing that lines should have such a strong presence in some of the artist's



FIG. 5. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *Portrait of Josef Viktor Widmann*, 1898, oil on canvas, 55 × 38.5 cm. CR no. 798. Bern, Kunstmuseum, bequest of Ch. Edm. von Steiger-Pinson. Image: Kunstmuseum Bern.



FIG. 6. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *Portrait of Berthe Hodler-Jacques*, 1898, oil on canvas, 40 × 27 cm. CR no. 801. Private collection. Image: SIK-ISEA, Zurich.



FIG. 7. — Cuno Amiet (Swiss, 1868–1961). *Portrait of Ferdinand Hodler*, 1898, tempera and oil on canvas, 76 × 52.5 cm. CR no. 1898.04. Private collection. Image: SIK-ISEA, Zurich, © D. Thalmann, Aarau, Switzerland.

most important works. And although Hodler's auxiliary lines only appear in a small number of finished paintings, their presence was noticeable and unusual to Hodler's contemporaries. Art historian Artur Weese remarks in 1918, "From now on, i.e., from the transition of the eighties to the nineties, there is probably no picture by Hodler's hand on which the space would not be structured by an ordering of fields, visibly or veiled, overtly or as a secret network."¹⁵

In 1898, Hodler's friend Cuno Amiet painted a portrait of the artist standing in front of a cartoon for the mural commissioned to depict Swiss history in the armory hall of in the Swiss National Museum (fig. 7). Amiet's portrait of Hodler is the only one of Amiet's approximately 450 known portraits to show a visible grid of lines. Amiet kept this work and exhibited it at the VIII Internationale Kunstausstellung (International Art Exhibition) in Munich and at the XII. *Wiener Secession* (Vienna Secession) in 1901. In 1902, collector Oscar Miller, to whom Amiet had sold a second version of the portrait, this time without the grid, asked to exchange his painting for the one with the grid.¹⁶ Furthermore, Swiss painter Giovanni Giacometti sent a postcard to their mutual friend Amiet in 1907, in which a small sketch shows Hodler painting a series of landscapes, each covered with vertical lines (fig. 8).¹⁷ The gentle criticism that it echoes is aimed at the artist's large output of landscape paintings, but at the same time, it seems to make fun of his excessive use of auxiliary lines.

It is difficult to judge whether the visibility of lines and grids was just a remarkable element for Hodler's contemporaries or whether it disturbed them. Collectors



FIG. 8. — Giovanni Giacometti (Swiss, 1868–1933). Postcard to Cuno Amiet in Oschwand, 19 September 1907. Oschwand, Archiv Amiet; Zurich, Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA). Image: SIK-ISEA, Zurich.

repeatedly perceived Hodler's paintings as unfinished, but it remains unclear whether this had anything to do with the presence of the grids. A letter to the collector Carl Reininghaus, for example, reveals that Reininghaus had urged Hodler to "finish" the version of *The Admired Young Man* that Reininghaus had recently acquired (see fig. 2). Hodler wrote to Reininghaus on 14 February 1905: "As for the retouching, I did what you wanted, point by point. I don't want to list everything I retouched. It would be impossible for me to go beyond that without acting against the painting's interest. I would point out that all these retouches alter the character of the execution, of the ductus. The better, as you know, is often the enemy of the good. . . . For me, the painting is very finished. . . . I already found it sufficient in Vienna."¹⁸ Here, as in other cases, it is obvious that the client's idea of what a finished painting should look like differed from the artist's. But there isn't any evidence that explicitly shows that the visibility of the grid was the reason for dissatisfaction on the part of the clients.

The Question of Why

How do we explain the intriguing presence of the grids and auxiliary lines in Hodler's paintings? It is tempting to interpret their visibility for technical reasons. Restorer and Hodler specialist Karoline Beltinger argues that the overpainting of dark lines in sections that show a loose or spotted application of paint would have altered the character of these areas.¹⁹ This explanation is undeniably convincing for many of his oil sketches, even though in numerous cases, Hodler did not hesitate to cover the grids. However, this argument seems difficult to apply to artworks that were intended to be

autonomous from the outset, for the simple reason that Hodler evidently had no trouble painting over the grids and lines in almost all of those cases. As mentioned above, he obscured them in all of his landscape paintings, and in the vast number of his figure paintings and portraits. Even where they remained visible, they only showed in certain parts, and Hodler's decisions as to where the lines were left had nothing to do with the nature of the paint application in the corresponding areas. To put it simply: If Hodler wanted to cover the technical lines, which was usually the case, he had no trouble doing so. Conversely, if he left them visible, it seems that he wanted them to be seen.

Considering the significance of parallel and symmetrical structures in Hodler's work overall, the act of leaving the technical lines visible could further illustrate the principle of parallelism that the artist valued so highly. From the beginning, the literature on Hodler has delineated the artist's own interest in the philosophical-aesthetic construct of parallelism; Hodler himself did everything he could to ensure the connection, repeatedly commenting on what he saw as the paramount principle of his art and jealously passing parallelism off as his own discovery.²⁰ Hodler's parallelism is based on the observation that repetitions of form can be found in nature in the most diverse ways, be it in rows or symmetrical reflections around an axis. According to Hodler, this outward sameness of beings of all kinds—trees, flowers, leaves, humans—manifests an inner sameness that connects living beings and demands their unification in a society that reflects this equality.²¹ Loosli quotes Hodler as follows: "The distinguishing features that separate us from one another are thus infinitesimal compared to the similarities that unite and unify us. The whole of human solidarity, our generic sense of belonging together, is nothing other than an application of parallelist cognition."²² The artist's task, for Hodler, is to make visible the law of parallelism that prevails in the cosmos, through parallel and symmetrical structures in the composition. At the same time, parallelist repetition also enhances the effect of a motif, thus becoming a crucial principle of composition.²³ In his lecture "La mission de l'artiste" ("The Mission of the Artist") of 1897, Hodler states: "In all these cases, it is easy to perceive the common principle and to understand that the parallelism of these subjects from life is also a decorative parallelism. . . . To aim for unity, a strong and powerful unity, is to exalt something above everything else, to express this something strongly, be it a subject characterized by grace or by strength."²⁴

It may be a trivial observation that the transfer lines, or those resulting from the application of the sighting grid, form parallels—yet without any intrinsic reference to the subject. It seems that in some pictures the technical parallels take on the role of representing a parallelist structure where other motifs do not. For example, the depiction of Godé-Darel on her deathbed shows a network of transfer lines on the white mattress (fig. 9). Of the three full-figure versions, only this version in the Kunstmuseum Solothurn has transfer lines visible to the unaided eye. The other two versions, by contrast, show other forms of repetition: The painting in the Aargauer Kunsthauus displays a pattern of stylized roses on the wallpaper behind the deathbed (fig. 10), while the version in the Kunstmuseum Basel shows three parallel horizontal stripes at the top



FIG. 9. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *The Dead Valentine Godé-Darel*, 1915, oil on canvas, 60 × 124 cm. CR no. 935. Solothurn, Kunstmuseum. Image: SIK-ISEA, Zurich.



FIG. 10. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *The Dead Valentine Godé-Darel*, 1915, oil on canvas, 60.5 × 124.5 cm. CR no. 934. Aarau, Aargauer Kunsthaus, Collection Werner Coninx. Image: Werner Coninx Stiftung, Zurich.

of the composition that mirror the three horizontal layers of the bed structure and float above two vertical, slightly displaced parallels of the bedposts.²⁵ Seen in comparison with the other two versions, the Solothurn painting gives the impression that the technically conditioned grid of lines becomes an inherent part of the motif, a folded structure of the sheet, not unlike the folded grid that characterizes the tablecloth in Hodler's much earlier *Banquet of the Gymnasts* (1877/78), where the tablecloth is structured by a square, folded pattern.²⁶ Therefore, it may be that auxiliary lines take on the task of representing the parallelist principles of repetition, sequence, and symmetry where content-related motives do not. In exceptional cases, even the reverse seems possible, in which a thematic motif of parallelism can arise from the technical structure of a grid. In an oil study for *View into the Infinite*, Hodler placed some of the stylized flowers on the auxiliary lines (fig. 11).



FIG. 11. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). Oil study for *View into the Infinite*, 1913, oil on canvas, 120.7 × 60.3 cm. CR no. 1598. Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire. Image: Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Ville de Genève.

Although the visibility of the technical lines may sometimes represent parallel principles, this alone does not offer a sufficient explanation. Auxiliary lines can also be found in pictures where the pictorial motifs already convey a strong sense of parallelism, such as in the Zurich version of *Unanimity* (see fig. 3). When the depicted figures are already organized in parallel, there is no need to introduce additional parallel structures through visible lines. As an explanation, the principle of *non finito* appears to be, in my mind, the most convincing possibility, an option that Beltinger also considers in her technical study.²⁷ This is all the more so when we take into account that Hodler's works show several other forms of the “unfinished,” such as the very spontaneous, expressive execution of certain sections, the visibility of pentimenti or, in rare cases, even the lack of coloration in some areas.

The concept of *non finito* encompasses different forms and origins of the unfinished: The term is used for works that remained unfinished due to external circumstances—for example, because an artist died before completion, the commissioner withdrew, or perhaps the artist and commissioner experienced disagreements. Further, the notion of *non finito* can also include the idea that the artist gave up on the work after becoming dissatisfied with the preliminary result and no longer believed in a successful completion. Another form of *non finito* emerges through the deliberate expression of the

unfinished in works that the artist considers undoubtedly to be finished—resulting in the peculiar paradox of the “finished unfinished” work of art. Notions of the *non finito* are not all the same, and even if the beholder may appreciate similar aesthetic qualities in such works, different reasons for and uses of the *non finito* lead to different viewing experiences.

The works by Hodler considered here were not left unfinished due to external circumstances; nor did their condition result from artistic challenges. Rather, these works show deliberately chosen indicators of the unfinished. They are, as Hodler told collector Reininghaus regarding *The Admired Young Man*, “very finished.”²⁸ At the time, a sketchy execution or the loose gesture were widely accepted and sought-after techniques.²⁹ Seen in this light, Hodler’s suggestive approach to pictorial motifs, the sketchiness of certain areas of his compositions, and the visibility of pentimenti, together with his enterprising, almost excessive selling of oil studies as such, seem to express an artistic attitude shaped by Romanticism and impressionism that satisfied the corresponding preferences of contemporary collectors. However, what collides with this view is the fact that the presence of strict patterns of technical lines seems to contradict the idea of the artist guided by intuitive technique. Hodler’s almost pedantic fixation on measuring, his use of the sighting grid and the Dürer pane, and his application of transfer lines are the opposite of the spontaneous and the intuitive.

Hodler was very aware of the artistic tendencies surrounding him and defended Edouard Manet, for example, against critics in his circle.³⁰ Even so, he was far more interested in the old masters of the Italian and German Renaissance than in his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. If we take the primary sources, especially his letters, as a point of reference, we see that he felt much more fascinated by the works of artists such as Raphael, Paolo Veronese, Titian, Albrecht Dürer, and later, Giotto, than by the impressionists. For example, Hodler wrote to his friend and former student Marc Odier from Madrid in 1878 about his visits to the Museo Nacional del Prado: “At the museum, it was Raphael that I liked the best. . . . Titian, Veronese, Ribera, and Velazquez were my next favorites. But only Raphael’s paintings really touched me.”³¹ And a few days later, “One painter I always like enormously is Veronese. His figures are well built, well placed, and richly colored. . . . There is a small painting by Mantegna which is magnificent, with a beautifully styled drawing and magnificent drapery. It’s one of the things I’ve admired most. . . . I think the painter I’d like above all others is Giotto, but I’ll have to go to Italy to see him.”³² Five years later, in 1883, Hodler visited the Alte Pinakothek in Munich and wrote again to Odier: “It’s from the latter [Alte Pinakothek] that I speak enthusiastically of Dürer’s *The Four Apostles*, Perugino, Raphael, in a word the early Italian and German schools.”³³ By contrast, he thought little of recent German art, as he expressed in a letter to Bernese singer Jenny Studer: “I prefer not to talk about the Neue Pinakothek [,] something inferior [,] the highly praised modern German art. The art of Kaulbach or Piloty.”³⁴ In 1904 he noted, in a text written about his artistic principle and the artist Gustav Klimt, “My favorite artists are Dürer and the early Italians.”³⁵ Daniel Baud-Bovy, then curator at the Musée Rath and later director of the École des

Beaux-Arts in Geneva, recorded in his diary in 1905 that Hodler had told him, “Today, Giotto is my man. I saw him recently in Italy. That’s nature! Michelangelo is beautiful, too, his strength and curved lines. But after him, it’s all over.”³⁶

In his book *Erinnerungen an Ferdinand Hodler* (1918; Memories about Ferdinand Hodler), painter Fritz Widmann recounts an incident that took place in 1898 when the artist came to the Widmann house to paint the aforementioned portrait of Fritz’s father, Josef Viktor Widmann (see fig. 5):

Once, at the end of the session, I took Hodler through my parents’ bedroom so that he could wash out his brushes in a neighboring room. On that occasion, he unexpectedly saw an old oil print after Raphael’s *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*. He was strongly moved. He stood in front of it for a long time, at first without a word; then gradually collecting himself, he told me in an excited voice: “This is perhaps the most beautiful composition ever created by an artist. And even in this moderate reprint, far removed from the original, the divine beauty so overwhelmed me at the unexpected sight of it that I struggled with emotion.” In the conversation that followed on the way to his workplace, he proved to be a close connoisseur and admirer of the great Renaissance art.³⁷

Hodler’s enthusiasm for the art of the Renaissance and his obvious desire to see his own work in its tradition opens up a new perspective on Hodler’s *non finito*, namely, as a sign itself of artistic reference to the Renaissance.

The Concept of non finito and Hodler’s Classicism

There is no need to elaborate too extensively on the fact that the notion of *non finito* occupied an important place in Renaissance art. There was a high number of unfinished works by such outstanding figures as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo.³⁸ In Titian’s late work, a very loose style of painting, at least close to the *non finito*, comes to feature prominently in his oeuvre.³⁹ That which was unfinished received attention and appreciation in art theory of the time, not least through the authority and judgment of Pliny, who in numerous places in book thirty-five of his *Natural History* praises the quality of the unfinished and warns of the danger of too much perfection.⁴⁰ Giorgio Vasari, in turn, repeatedly comments on the quality of the spontaneous and the danger of the overly finished, including in a comparison the two marble pulpits in the cathedral in Florence, one by Luca della Robbia and the other by Donatello.⁴¹

Hodler must have been aware of the appreciation of the unfinished during the Renaissance period. From contemporaries such as Loosli, we know that Hodler had read the treatises of the early modern period.⁴² There was one aspect of *non finito* that he must have felt had much to do with his own working method: the visible presence of the working process. The participation of the beholder in the creative process is one of the effects of the *non finito* mentioned by Pliny when the ancient thinker states, “It is also a very unusual and memorable fact that the last works of artists and their unfinished

pictures . . . are more admired than those which they finished because in them are seen the preliminary drawings left visible and the artist's actual thoughts."⁴³ Furthermore, the visibility of the artist's approach is instructive for other artists, as it gives them a direct insight into the methods of a virtuoso in their field.⁴⁴

The unfinished as the presence of working methods, which allows the beholder to participate in the creative process and the apprentice painter to absorb a teaching example—this is a concept that Hodler could certainly identify with. It corresponds with his willingness to provide information about his techniques and equipment, and it fits with a large number of surviving statements and anecdotes, all of which show that Hodler was inclined to reveal how he worked and even had a certain missionary attitude about the techniques he used. Not least, it fits with his self-portrayal as a craftsman, which he maintained even in the years of his greatest success. The visibility of traces of the working process in important Renaissance works of art and the appreciation of the unfinished in the art theory of the time must have confirmed his own ideas and applied procedures. It is not a stretch to assume that his encounters with Renaissance *non finito* encouraged Hodler all the more to leave the traces of his techniques visible. Moreover, the display of the unfinished in this sense may also have become one of the means by which Hodler placed himself explicitly in the tradition.

To understand the flaunting of the unfinished as a reference to Renaissance art is supported by the fact that it is above all the genre of the allegorical figure painting—that is, a classical genre of the early modern period—in which Hodler makes use of the *non finito* and in which he shows the traces of technical tools particularly popular during the Renaissance. In contrast, his landscape paintings, which represent a completely modern concept, free from allegorical and staffage figures, show no signs of *non finito*, even though he used the same tools.

More generally, these observations on the use of *non finito* and its relation to Renaissance art can reframe the understanding of Hodler's oeuvre as a manifestation of a modern classicism. There is no question that his early work fits into the intellectual world and visual language of realism, that his figure paintings from the 1890s onward would be inconceivable without their connection to the contemporary currents of symbolism and the Lebensreform movement, and that his late landscapes in particular show clear tendencies toward abstraction. Nor shall it be denied that Hodler was the strongest innovative force in the environment of artistic creation around 1900 in Switzerland, which also led to his dominant position there. But it is equally difficult to overlook the fact that, especially in his figure paintings, he adopted aims and procedures that can only reasonably be described as classical or classicist. Hodler's important works from the middle and later periods typically depict transcendent ideas by portraying nude or barefoot figures in an undetermined natural setting. These figures express the represented ideas through their postures, gestures, and positions (see figs. 2–4). The pronounced visual hierarchy between the figures that fill the composition, sometimes appearing statuesque, and their rather unspecific environment can be seen as a reference to the relationship between figure and landscape in works such as those

of Leonardo, Raphael, or Michelangelo, where humans are presented as central, full-format motifs in an often universal landscape.

It may be both accurate and productive to understand Hodler's practice as one that revolved around finding a contemporary form of classicism—a perception that I assume was only reluctantly made a subject of discussion until now because of the fear that such a label as "classicist" would exclude Hodler from the canonical lines of modern art's development. However, Hodler's contribution to artistic innovation around 1900 consists precisely of a new kind of classicism, namely, one that broke completely with the iconography of antiquity. Unlike the classicism of French painter Pierre Henri Puvis de Chavannes or Swiss painters Arnold Böcklin and Félix Vallotton, Hodler's work rejects everything narrative and makes no use of ancient or Christian mythologies. This explains the artist's ambivalent attitude toward artists such as Böcklin: "Böcklin is very great, but a little too literary for my taste."⁴⁵ In Hodler's oeuvre, classicism can only refer to certain visual strategies, such as the visualization of ideas through figures removed from any specific temporal or geographic location, or a relationship between figure and space that gives the former clear primacy in nearly monumental appearance. The visibility of technical lines and grids may have been a further way for Hodler to express a contemporary classicism.

Hodler only left auxiliary lines in works where he expected their presence to be accepted, those intended for collectors, art museums, art-critic friends, and students—essentially, a well-informed art historical public. For example, he left lines visible on the two versions of *View into the Infinite* and on the second, monumental version of *Unanimity*, which Hodler had hoped to place in the Kunstmuseum Bern and which is now in the Kunsthaus Zürich (see figs. 3–4).⁴⁶ In contrast, the first version, which was created for the Hannover, Germany, town hall, has no visible lines; nor do the two studies that Hodler submitted to Hannover's commissioners. Among the portraits, those of his son Hector from 1912 (who was probably involved in the execution of the painting), Odier, and Widmann present a large, clearly visible grid of lines (fig. 12, see fig. 5).⁴⁷ A faintly translucent grid, which in one place becomes a striking motif, as a kind of ornament on the wall, is also found on one of the two portraits of Swedish art historian Fredrik Robert Martin, a great admirer of Hodler.⁴⁸ Thus, the artist seems to have been aware that an informed audience would appreciate or at least accept the lines as consciously placed signs rather than purely technical remnants.



FIG. 12. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *Portrait of Marc Odier*, 1892, oil on canvas, 100.5 × 79.5 cm. CR no. 780. Basel, Kunstmuseum, donation by Amerbach-Stiftung. Image: Kunstmuseum Basel, Martin P. Bühler.

The ultimate reasons for the visibility of technical lines in Hodler's paintings cannot be definitively determined. Nevertheless, this issue leads to the center of Hodler's artistic intentions. I interpret the visible lines as deliberate indicators of the unfinished, through which Hodler presents himself as an artist in the tradition of the Renaissance. There may also be cases in which the parallel structure of the technical lines replaces parallelistic motifs or assumes such a motif itself. Nonetheless, Hodler seems to have left the technical lines visible only when he assumed the public was informed enough to appreciate this somewhat extravagant *non finito*.

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Notes

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Note on the artwork titles: Apart from a few exceptions, Hodler did not assign titles to his works and often considered them unimportant. Even during his lifetime, several titles often circulated for one and the same work. For this reason, English-language artwork titles are used in the essay and the captions. The numbers given in the captions ("CR no.") refer to the catalogue raisonné: Oskar Bätschmann et al., *Ferdinand Hodler: Catalogue raisonné der Gemälde*, vols. 2 and 3 (SIK-ISEA; Scheidegger & Spiess, 2008–2018), <https://www.ferdinand-hodler.ch/>.

1. What follows is only possible thanks to the research conducted by my colleagues at the Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA), particularly Karoline Beltinger and Danièle Gros in the field of technology and Oskar Bätschmann, Paul Müller, and others who wrote the catalogue raisonné. See Karoline Beltinger et al., *Kunsttechnologische Forschungen zur Malerei von Ferdinand Hodler* (SIK-ISEA, 2007); Karoline Beltinger et al., *Hodler malt: Neue kunsttechnologische Forschungen zu Ferdinand Hodler* (SIK-ISEA; Scheidegger & Spiess, 2019); and Oskar Bätschmann et al., *Ferdinand Hodler: Catalogue raisonné der Gemälde*, 4 vols. (SIK-ISEA; Scheidegger & Spiess, 2008–2018), <https://www.ferdinand-hodler.ch/>. Moreover, we should not forget that our research stands on the shoulders of a previous generation of scholars. For example, see Carl Albert Loosli, *Aus der Werkstatt Ferdinand Hodlers* (Birkhäuser, 1938).

2. Ferdinand Hodler, *Carnet 1898 b*, 14, transcribed by Jura Brüscheweiler, quoted in Beltinger et al., *Hodler malt*, 48.

3. Loosli, *Aus der Werkstatt Ferdinand Hodlers*, 101.

4. See Loosli, *Aus der Werkstatt Ferdinand Hodlers*, 85, 89.

5. Stéphanie Guerzoni, *Ferdinand Hodler: Sa vie, son oeuvre, son enseignement, souvenirs personnels* (Pierre Cailler, 1957), 98.

6. Ferdinand Hodler, "Les dix commandements du peintre F. Hodler," 1874, in Ferdinand Hodler, *Écrits esthétiques*, ed. Diana Blome and Niklaus Manuel Güdel (Archives Jura Brüscheweiler; Editions Notari, 2017), 39.

7. Ferdinand Hodler, *Self-portrait (The student)*, 1874, oil on canvas, 113 × 73 cm, Kunsthau Zürich, Bätschmann et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 2, cat. no. 635, <https://recherche.sik-isea.ch/sik:work-6005608/in/catalogues.hodler.band2/>.

8. Guerzoni, *Ferdinand Hodler*, 74.

9. Loosli, *Aus der Werkstatt Ferdinand Hodlers*, 66.

10. Adolf Frey, *Ferdinand Hodler* (Haessel, 1922), 12.

11. A photograph by his student and model Gertrud Müller shows the artist in his studio, sitting next to the Dürer pane. Gertrud Dübi-

Müller, *Ferdinand Hodler, with the Dürer Pane next to Him*, 1917, gelatin silver print, 30.2 × 35.7 cm, Winterthur, Fotostiftung Schweiz, <https://fotostiftung.zetcom.net/de/collection/item/87705/>.

12. According to the minutes of the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft, which commissioned the work, and its annual report of 1917, Hodler planned to rework the second figure from the left and the rightmost figure in the Zurich version after he had already handed the painting over to the Kunsthau—not an unusual approach for Hodler, who often made significant revisions, even to paintings he had already completed. It is possible that he would have reduced the visibility of the technical lines in the revision of the Kunsthau's painting; nevertheless, the lines were not the reason for the planned revision, which Hodler was unable to carry out for health reasons, but rather, it was his aforementioned dissatisfaction with the posture of the two figures. Minutes of board meeting of the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft, 29 November 1917, Kunsthau Zürich, Archives of the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft. In the catalogue raisonné, Sabine Hügli-Vass comments, "At the end of 1916, CR 1594 was completed." Bätschmann et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 3, pt. 1, 481, cat. no. 1594. Also in view of the fact that the paintings *The Admired Young Man* and *Unanimity* in the Kunsthau Zürich have visible lines, it seems rather unlikely that Hodler would have removed them from *View into the Infinite*. (Additionally, Hodler drew attention to the finished state of *The Admired Young Man* in writing; see this essay, note 18.) The Basel version, originally intended for Zurich but deemed too large by the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft, was reworked several times by Hodler. (Ferdinand Hodler, *View into the Infinite*, 1913–17, oil on canvas, 446 × 895 cm, Kunstmuseum Basel. Bätschmann et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 3, pt. 2, cat. no. 1593, <https://recherche.sik-isea.ch/sik:work-6007360/in/catalogues.hodler:exp/>.) After a final revision, it was exhibited at the Kunsthalle Basel and the Kunsthau Zürich in 1917 and acquired by the Basler Kunstverein in the same year. There is no evidence that Hodler planned further revisions of this version. See Mitg. (unidentified abbreviation), "Eröffnung der Hodler-Ausstellung in der

Kunsthalle,” in *National-Zeitung*, no. 115, midday edition, 15 February 1917, 5: “The glass-roofed room offered Hodler such an excellent opportunity to hang his work that he came to Basel himself and spent several days putting the finishing touches to the painting ‘View into the Infinite.’” See also Sabine Hügli-Vass’s comment in Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, 479, vol. 3, pt. 2, cat. no. 1593: “[Hodler] only completed the work with the last corrections when the painting was exhibited at the Kunsthalle Basel in February 1917.” By contrast, the version acquired by collector Emma Schmidt-Müller and now in the Kunstmuseum Solothurn is definitely unfinished. See Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 3, pt. 2, 484–85, cat. no. 1597.

13. Visible technical lines only appear in works from this cycle after Godé-Darel’s death.

14. Fritz Widmann, *Erinnerungen an Ferdinand Hodler* (Rascher, 1918), 61.

15. Artur Weese, *Aus der Welt Ferdinand Hodlers* (Francke, 1918), 24.

16. See the comments by Franz Müller on the two versions of Amiet’s portrait of Hodler in Franz Müller and Viola Radlach, *Cuno Amiet: Die Gemälde 1883–1919* (SIK-ISEA; Scheidegger & Spiess, 2014), vol. 1, 166–69, cat. nos. 1898.04, 1898.05.

17. See Oskar Bächtli, *Ferdinand Hodler: Bilder der Alpen* (Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften, 2006), 3–4.

18. Ferdinand Hodler, letter to Carl Reininghaus, 14 February 1905, written by Berthe Hodler-Jacques on behalf of Ferdinand Hodler, with additions by Ferdinand Hodler, Bibliothèque de Genève, quoted in Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 3, pt. 1, 327, cat. no. 1348. The painting was exhibited at the nineteenth Secession exhibition in Vienna in 1904.

19. Beltinger et al., *Hodler malt*, 56.

20. For example, Carl Albert Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler: Leben, Werk und Nachlass*, vol. 1 (R. Suter, 1921), 75–87. For a more recent discussion of Hodler’s parallelism, see Laurence Madeleine, ed., *Hodler // Parallelismus* (Kunstmuseum Bern; Musée d’Art et d’Histoire Genève, 2018), therein esp. Oskar Bächtli, “Hodler’s Parallelism,” 155–66; and Paul Müller, “Obsession Parallelismus,” 167–76. See also Paul Müller, “Parallelismus: Hodler’s programmatischer Anspruch,” in *Ferdinand Hodler, Die Forschung, die Anfänge, die Arbeit, der Erfolg, der Kontext*, ed. Oskar Bächtli et al. (SIK-ISEA, 2009), 107–20. According to Loosli, Hodler commented on his “authorship” of parallelism as

follows: “It is my merit, which no one can rob me of, to have formulated parallelism, to have been the first to apply it consciously and practically. Of course, now that I have demonstrated it, everyone is in a position to do so; now everyone wants to have been the clever one, but it is not true; they owe parallelism to me.” Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler*, 1:75.

21. Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler*, 1:79–81.

22. Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler*, 1:80.

23. Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler*, 1:81–87.

24. Ferdinand Hodler, “The Mission of the Artist” (1897), trans. Henri Dorra, in *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henri Dorra (University of California Press, 1994), 251. See also Ferdinand Hodler, “La mission de l’artiste,” in *Écrits esthétiques*, 177.

25. Ferdinand Hodler, *The Dead Valentine Godé-Darel*, 1915, oil on canvas, 65.5 × 81 cm, Basel, Kunstmuseum, Collection Rudolf Staechelin. Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 2, 279, cat. no. 936, <https://recherche.sik-isea.ch/sik:work-6006305/in/catalogues.hodler.band2:exp/>.

26. Ferdinand Hodler, *Banquet of the Gymnasts*, 1877/1878, oil on canvas, 228 × 355 cm, Zurich, Kunsthau. Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 2, 108–10, cat. no. 1066, <https://recherche.sik-isea.ch/sik:work-6006494/in/catalogues.hodler:exp/>.

27. Beltinger et al., *Hodler malt*, 56.

28. See this essay, note 18.

29. See Asher Ethan Miller, “Finish/Finished: French Painting from Romanticism to Impressionism,” in *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible*, ed. Andrea Bayer et al. (Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, 2016), 132–39, esp. 133, 136.

30. See Matthias Fischer, *Ferdinand Hodler in Karikatur und Satire / Ferdinand Hodler par la caricature et la satire* (Benteli, 2012), 17.

31. Ferdinand Hodler, letter to Marc Odier, 16 November 1878, in Ferdinand Hodler, *Correspondance. 1874–1904*, ed. Diana Blome and Niklaus M. Güdel (Notari, forthcoming), letter no. 15.

32. Ferdinand Hodler, letter to Marc Odier, 21 November 1878, in Hodler, *Correspondance*, letter no. 17.

33. Ferdinand Hodler, letter to Marc Odier, 29 July 1883, in Hodler, *Correspondance*, letter no. 72.

34. Ferdinand Hodler, letter to Jenny Studer, 3 August 1883, in Hodler, *Correspondance*, letter no. 74.

35. Ferdinand Hodler, "Über mein Kunstprinzip und über Klimt. 1904," in *Écrits esthétiques*, 359.

36. Unpublished diary by Daniel Baud-Bovy, 30 May 1905, 31, archives of the Institut Ferdinand Hodler, Geneva, BB-2010-0004. On Hodler and Giotto, see Niklaus Manuel Güdel, "Réception moderne de Giotto: L'artiste et l'exégèse, d'Ingres à Rothko," *Sociétés et représentations*, no. 51 (2021): 27–28.

37. Widmann, *Erinnerungen an Ferdinand Hodler*, 62–63.

38. See Carmen C. Bambach, "Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Notions of the Unfinished in Art," in Bayer et al., *Unfinished*, 30.

39. See Andrea Bayer, "Renaissance Views of the Unfinished," in Bayer et al., *Unfinished*, 26–28.

40. Pliny, the Elder, *Natural History*, book 35, trans. Harris Rackham (Harvard University Press, 2014), 17, 19, 313, 321, 329, 367.

41. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects* (1568), vol. 2, trans. Gaston du C. De Vere (The Medici Society; Philip Lee Warner, 1912–15), 121.

42. "When he [Hodler] came to Geneva and then to Menn, the latter soon realized what Hodler was interested in and what he was missing. He therefore played Vitruvius, Leonardo, and Dürer into his hands. Hodler threw himself into these books with his characteristic zeal, examined them and rewrote them for his own use." Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler*, 1:23.

43. Pliny, *Natural History*, book 35, 367.

44. See Pliny, *Natural History*, book 35, 313.

45. Hodler, "Über mein Kunstprinzip und über Klimt," 359.

46. About the version of *Unanimity* which is now in the Kunsthaus Zürich, Hodler wrote to collector Willy Russ-Young in 1915: "I hope that one day I will be able to place this picture in the museum in Bern." Archives Hodler of Carl Albert Loosli, deposit at SIK-ISEA, Zurich, HA 22.3, fascicle no. 112. The Kunstmuseum Bern didn't purchase the painting; instead Hodler only managed to sell it in 1917 to private collector Alfred Rüttschi, who made it available to the Kunsthaus Zürich and converted the deposit into a donation in 1919. See Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 3, pt. 2, 437–39, cat. no. 1496. On *View into the Infinite*, see this essay, note 12. The archival evidence indicates that Hodler had intended to revise the second version, now in the Kunsthaus Zürich, but was unable to before his death; therefore, it is uncertain whether all the auxiliary lines would have remained in place in the final intended product.

47. Ferdinand Hodler, *Portrait of Hector Hodler*, 1912, oil on canvas, 123 × 64 cm, Kunsthaus Zürich. See Bernadette Walter, "Bildnis Hector Hodler," in Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 2, 265, cat. no. 913, <https://recherche.sik-isea.ch/sik:work-6006244/in/catalogues.hodler.band2:exp/>.

48. Ferdinand Hodler, *Portrait of Fredrik Robert Martin*, 1916/17, oil on canvas, 87.5 × 63.5 cm, private collection. Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 2, 315–16, cat. no. 988, <https://recherche.sik-isea.ch/sik:work-6006118/in/catalogues.hodler.band2:exp/>.