

### Adolf Wölfli, 1864–1930



**A**dolf Wölfli was born in Bowil, Switzerland, in 1864. Abandoned by his alcoholic father and orphaned in his ninth year by the death of his unstable mother, he was shunted about from one rural foster family to another, often physically and emotionally abused, until at 16 he became an itinerant farm worker. Always shy and withdrawn, he was occasionally arrested for minor delinquencies until, after his second arrest in 1895 for sexual assault on a very young girl, he was declared to be insane and was hospitalized at the Waldau Hospital near Bern, where he remained until his death in 1930. Profoundly psychotic, often violent, he was diagnosed as schizophrenic and was held in solitary confinement for several years. In 1904, when his acute psychosis had to some degree subsided, he began spontaneously and for the first time to draw, initially in pencil, later in colored pencils. His drawings quickly engaged the attention of the hospital staff, particularly that of his psychiatrist, Dr. Walter Morgenthaler, who encouraged him, supplied him with materials, and purchased a number of his works. Ultimately, Morgenthaler published a book, *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler* (1), that brought Wölfli and his art to a wide European audience and, especially, to the attention of a number of avant-garde artists of the period, who along with others began to collect his designs.

Wölfli's intricately composed and richly colored drawings were usually backed by lengthy, grandiose, and often incomprehensible pseudoautobiographical texts; they often included musical passages scored in a notation of his own devising. When in the 1940s the French painter Jean Dubuffet undertook the collection and promotion of what he termed *Art Brut* ("raw art")—essentially the efforts of untaught, mentally ill, and eccentric persons—Wölfli's work was central to his project (now housed in Le Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland). In the years since, his drawings have been carefully studied and exhibited in museums and galleries the world over. Much of his work, together with his vast handwritten autobiography and other writings, is preserved by the Adolf Wölfli Foundation at the Bern Kunstmuseum.

#### Reference

1. Morgenthaler W: *Madness and Art (Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler [1921])*. Edited and translated by Esmán AH. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1990

AARON H. ESMAN, M.D.

Address reprint requests to Dr. Esmán, 115 East 86th St., New York, NY 10028. Images courtesy of Dr. Esmán and the Adolf Wölfli Foundation.