

mahJ
musée d'art
et d'histoire
du Judaïsme

Jules Adler

Painter of the people

17th October 2019
— 23rd February 2020

Born into a modest Jewish family at Luxeuil-les-Bains in Haute-Saône in 1865, Jules Adler was a painter of the second naturalist generation, in the line of painters of reality initiated by Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), also from Franche-Comté. A Dreyfusard from the outset, he developed a vision of the world close to that of Émile Zola (1840-1902) and focussed his attention on the common people: factory workers, miners, the Parisian working-class, those living on the margins of society, peasants, seamen, men, women, children and the elderly, none with the same fate but all sharing a form of social relegation.

After Dole, Évian and Roubaix, the aim of this first retrospective of Adler's work in Paris is to rediscover the work of an artist unjustly unrecognised, even if one of his pictures,

The Strike at Le Creusot (1899), became an iconic image of the workers' struggle. Adler produced an oeuvre of great power, particularly in the first part of his long career, and was widely acclaimed during his lifetime, but his indifference to the avant-garde movements and his increasing interest in the rural world were misunderstood by the following generations. At the mahJ, this exhibition also focuses on the resonances of Adler's Jewish identity in his perception of the world and commitments as a man and artist.

Curators:
Claire Decomps and Amélie Lavin,
assisted by Virginie Michel

I – The early years

The third of five children, Jules Adler was born on 8 July 1865 at Luxeuil-les-Bains, where his parents had a draper's shop. Like most of the Jews in Franche-Comté, the Adler family came from the neighbouring département of Haut-Rhin, his grandparents having left Alsace in the early 19th century.

Adler showed his talent for drawing from a very early age and attended classes at the municipal drawing school, at a time when this discipline was highly regarded. Although foreign to artistic circles, his parents fully supported their son when he envisaged a career as a teacher. In 1882, the entire family moved to Paris when he enrolled at the École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs, then at the Académie Julian. In 1884, Adler attended courses at the École des Beaux-Arts and passed the competitive examination to become a drawing teacher.

Intent on becoming a painter, he unsuccessfully entered the Prix de Rome competition twice before giving this up. He showed at the Salon des Artistes Français in 1886, but it was in 1892 that the success of his first commission, *Transfusion of Goat's Blood*, launched his career in earnest.

II – Luxeuil and Franche-Comté

Jules Adler always maintained close ties with his native region, painting *My Old Luxeuil* (1832) like a “family portrait” and taking part in several exhibitions of artists from Franche-Comté in Paris.

Encouraged in his vocation from a very early age by his teachers and several prominent citizens, he remained friends with them throughout his life, notably with Senator Jules Jeanneney, Deputy Charles-Maurice Couyba, Mayor André Maroselli and Lucien Barbedette, his first biographer.

Their support culminated in the inauguration of the Musée Jules Adler at Luxeuil in 1933, an exceptional consecration for a living artist, and in 1938 with the commissioning

of decorative murals for the town's thermal baths, then being renovated. Installed from 1940 to 1945, these six large canvases – five of them are still in situ – pay tribute to Hygieia, the ancient Greek goddess of health, to whom the fountain in the park was already dedicated.

III – “The painter of the humble”

Adler very soon attracted attention with his depictions of the common people and misery, showing the victims of the modern world, notably the uprooted workers in *The Weary* and the ghostly, poverty-stricken figures in *The Soup Kitchen*, the picture which earned him the epithet of “painter of the humble” in 1906.

In these powerful, sombre, completely unpicturesque works, Adler's naturalism was inspired by the writings of Émile Zola. The exhausted workers in *The Weary* (1897) were based on a passage from Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877), and *The Mother* (1899) evokes the novel's main character, Gervaise. After Zola's death in 1902 Adler participated in the subscription for a monument in his memory and took part in the “Médan pilgrimage”.

Whereas Courbet had caused a scandal in his time for the supposed triviality of his vision, Adler espoused the values of the Third Republic, hence the acclaim these powerful, socially committed works received from the critics and public.

IV – In the coalfields

A great admirer of Zola and the Belgian painter and sculptor Constantin Meunier (1831-1905), in 1901 Adler went with his friend Tancrède Synave (1860-1936), to Charleroi in Belgium, one of the largest coalfields in Europe. There he produced the many sketches that resulted in two large pictures, *The Providence Blast Furnaces* (1904) and *In the Coalfields* (1901).

With the exception of *The Stokers* (1910), commissioned by the glassworks at Cognac, there is no heroic exaltation of work and industry in Adler's work – he was less interested in workers' manual gestures and machines than in the workers themselves. Without directly denouncing the plight of the workers, he adopted a critical attitude to the ideology of progress and emancipation through work. Exploitation, misery, alienation, workers' protests, industrial disputes and in particular *The Strike at Le Creusot* (1899) became the prime subjects of his work and later eclipsed the rest of his production in the public mind.

V – The Dreyfus Affair

Sensitive to all forms of injustice, Adler was quick to join the defence of Captain Dreyfus in 1898, signing petitions and protests. There was nothing obvious in this spontaneous, public commitment, since at that time many Jews preferred to distance themselves from anything that could jeopardise their still recent integration.

His studio in Paris became a meeting place for the Dreyfusards. It was in these circumstances that Adler met the painter and caricaturist Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen (1859-1923), Léon Zadoc-Kahn (1870-1843), son of the Chief Rabbi of France, and the writer and journalist Bernard Lazare (1865-1903). After the latter's death, Adler initiated the subscription for the erection of a monument, finally refused by his widow. He was joined in this by his great inspirer, Émile Zola.

VI – A painter at war

Too old to be mobilised, from 1915 Adler ran a canteen with his wife for artists in need and produced the poster *They too are doing their duty!* exhorting civilians to participate in the war effort. The poster contrasts starkly with the jingoistic images of the period in its portrayal of a wounded soldier.

In 1917, he was sent to Verdun as an “army artist”, then to the armaments foundry at Ruelle in Charente. But unlike a “war painter”, instead of depicting the combat on the front he focussed on the results of its violence, showing devastated landscapes, exhausted soldiers and prisoners, etc. Apart from two small pictures probably painted in his studio, he produced only drawings, painting being too difficult in such conditions.

After the war, Adler painted two large pictures, *The Mobilisation* and *The Armistice*, both on view in the last section of the exhibition. Here again in these two history paintings the subject is less the war than its consequences: the excitement of the men and the anxiety of the women at its outbreak and the relief and joy at the end of a conflict much longer and much more murderous than expected.

VII – A Jewish artist?

Although Adler always asserted his identity as a Jew, he never depicted a specifically Jewish subject. He was therefore not perceived as a Jewish artist by his contemporaries, except by a few journalists chronicling the participation of their coreligionists in the Salons.

Adler seems to have expressed his Jewishness – he was never a practicing Jew – above all by his political commitments, yet its link with his defence of the humble is never evoked in France, where one's religious beliefs are considered a private matter. On the other hand, this interpretation emerged very early on in Zionist circles seeking to identify a specifically “Jewish art”. One of his pictures was shown in Berlin in 1907 in “Ausstellung jüdischer Künstler”, an exhibition-manifesto ranging from the Jewish painters of the Emancipation in the early 19th century to the artists of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, founded in Jerusalem the previous year.

In 1924 and 1928, Adler showed works in two exhibitions organised by his friend Gustave Kahn (1859-1936), art critic and editor of the review *Menorah*. In the second exhibition, his pictures hung beside those of his pupil Maxa Nordau, daughter of the Zionist leader Max Nordau (1849-1923). Although it is difficult to regard Adler as a militant Zionist, his name figures on the list of donors to a fund for the acquisition of land in Palestine, and in 1922 he participated with the donation of a print in the creation of the “French section” in the Bezalel Museum in Jerusalem.

VIII – The streets of Paris

Adler arrived in Paris when he was seventeen, living near Place de la République until 1911, then at Les Batignolles. Observing and sketching life in the city’s working-class districts, he spotted the models he would invite to pose in his studio.

Always with an eye for detail, he portrayed familiar Parisian figures: market gardeners setting up their stall early in the morning in *The Faubourg Saint-Denis* (1895) and the dressmaker’s errand girl in *Le Trotin* (1903). He chronicled daily life in the capital from hour to hour and from season to season: the crowd of onlookers in *The Accident* (1912), the everyday beauty of a couple walking arm in arm in *Paris Morning* (1905) and the immaculate whiteness of girls taking their first communion in *Paris Spring* (1923). Most of these works show crowds in motion, ranging from workers in the inner suburbs to people walking on the boulevards.

Adler treated the railway, celebrated before him by Claude Monet and Gustave Caillebotte, as a fascinating spectacle in *The Smoke* (1924), while his etchings for Roger Dévigne’s *Ménilmontant*, published in 1937 and his only work as an illustrator, nostalgically show a Paris already disappearing.

IX – Peasants and sailors

Adler visited many of France’s regions, always sketching their particularities with the same naturalist concern for humanity subjected to both social and geographic determinism. Transcending the picturesque stereotypes of folklore painters, he focussed on the men, women and children he encountered: fishermen’s wives at Étapes waiting for their husbands to return during a storm, a farm boy and the aged Ludvine eating her soup.

Adler’s Paris was a pulsating universe overwhelmed by industrialisation and the rural exodus to the cities, but his depictions of France’s rural provinces and coastal communities from the 1900s onwards – above all after the First World War – seem frozen in the unchanging rhythm of daily life and work (*Return from the Pardon* in 1900, *Mourning in the Limousin* in 1931), timeless, even anachronistic visions compared to those of the avant-garde movements. And despite the honours he received throughout his career it was these paintings of the rural world, with their simplified drawing and areas of flat colour outlined in black, that were responsible for the relative oblivion into which he fell after he died.

X – The tramp

Contradicting the then predominant image of an antisocial, dangerous individual, Adler’s tramp is a free, friendly man. A familiar figure in the countryside, he roams the highways and byways singing at the top his voice or halting at a farm, his spade sometimes indicating that he is a travelling labourer paid by the day.

This vagabond becomes the “philosopher” in the picture of the same name (1910), possibly in memory of the militants of Utopian socialism dear to Courbet, who roamed the countryside spreading their theories of universal harmony.

Portrayed many times from 1898 to 1910, the wandering tramp can be regarded as an *alter ego* of the artist roaming rural France.

With his sack and beard, he also recalls the Jewish pedlar, an emblematic figure of Adler's native communities in eastern France, or even the Wandering Jew encountered fifty years earlier in *Bonjour Monsieur Courbet* (1854) by his illustrious predecessor. For the Dreyfusard critics, *The Tramp*, shown at the 1899 Salon, represented a kind of modern Wandering Jew, an "apostle of Truth and soldier of Justice".

XI – A painter caught in the war

After the establishment of the Vichy regime, Adler, then aged seventy-five, was confronted with anti-Jewish measures. When he was banned from exhibiting, he resigned from the committee of the Salon des Artistes Français in August 1940.

On 29 March 1944 he was arrested following a denunciation – he had supposedly been seen painting in the park at Les Batignolles, forbidden for Jews. He was interned with his wife at the Rothschild hospice in rue de Picpus, without being detained in the camp at Drancy, of which it was then an annexe. Although in 1944 the hospice was surrounded by barbed wire and kept watch over by guards with truncheons, the detention conditions there were much better than at Drancy and the couple escaped deportation – probably due to exterior interventions.

At Picpus, Adler continued to draw on sheets of low-quality paper, showing them after the war at the 1948 Salon as a "Series of 83 drawings done during my six-month internment after my arrest by the Krauts". His works during this period were mainly portraits of other internees, aged and incurable Jews often sketched in the hospice's garden, in which their situation as prisoners is never apparent.

As Adler's notebook and correspondence bear witness throughout the war, despite his helplessness faced with a world that had become incomprehensible, he lost none of his fundamentally optimistic nature and determination to never succumb to despair.

XII – A history painter?

Due both to his academic training and his interest in depicting the common people, Adler grappled with the question of history painting, for a long time regarded as the most superior painting genre but then in decline. In *The Strike at Le Creusot*, the monumental picture painted in 1899 to highlight the struggle of the workers at the Schneider factories, the woman brandishing the tricolour is reminiscent of Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Guiding the People* (1830). By depicting a current event – less the strike itself than the workers' victory – the picture acquires a universal dimension, hence its reproduction in numerous publications on the history of the labour movement and school books.

The Ferrer Demonstration (1911) and *The Mobilisation*, painted after the war, are more static. The active observer at Le Creusot has become a spectator, depicting the scene with a certain detachment. *The Armistice* (1919) was Adler's last depiction of a current event.

In his last large picture, *Paris, View from the Sacré-Cœur*, painted in 1936, the year of the Popular Front, the couple, recognisably the artist and his wife, have turned their backs on the Sacré-Cœur, symbol of the repression of the Paris Commune. Although the picture's dimensions are typical of history painting, its peaceful silence seems a far cry from the din of contemporary events.

Colloquium *

Sunday 1 December
10.00
**Jules Adler, painter
of the people**

with
Amélie Lavin and Claire
Decomps,
curators of the exhibition,
Vincent Chambarlhac,
Dominique Jarrassé,
Philippe Kaenel,
Frédéric Thomas
and Bertrand Tillier

Panel discussion *

Wednesday 15 January
19.30

Artists and the Dreyfus Affair

with Bertrand Tillier
and Philippe Oriol,
chaired by Anaïs Kien

Tours *

**Guided tours
Jules Adler, painter
of the people**

Sunday 27 October
11.15
Thursday 14 November
14.15
Wednesday 11 December
19.15
Tuesday 28 January
14.15
by Elisabeth Kurztag or Cécile
Petitet, mahJ lecturers

Sunday 9 February
11.15
by Claire Decomps,
curator of the exhibition

Art in France from the Restoration to the Third Republic at the Petit Palais

Tuesday 19 November
Friday 17 January
15.00
by Cécile Petitet,
mahJ lecturer

Literary tour Jules Adler and writers

Wednesday 27 November
18.15
Wednesday 18 December
14.15
Sunday 12 January
11.15
by Gérard Cherqui, actor
and film director

Workshops for adults *

From sketch to picture

Sunday 17 November
Sunday 15 December
Sunday 23 January
11.00
by an artist and former
student at the École des
Beaux-Arts

An exhibition, a work *

The Strike at Le Creusot
Wednesday 6 November
19.15
by Cécile Petitet
mahJ lecturer

The Armistice
Wednesday 22 January
19.15
by Yaëlle Baranes,
mahJ lecturer

Portrait of Doctor Roubinovitch

Wednesday 5 February
19.15
by Elise Malka, assistant
head of the mahJ's Education
and Mediation Department,
and Virginie Michel, curatorial
assistant at the mahJ

Activities for children *

**"Tableaux vivants"
after Jules Adler
(workshop for 8-12
year-olds)**

Tuesday 22 October
Friday 3 January
14.00

Game booklet

Jules Adler's young models
(from 6 years)

Publication *

The exhibition catalogue

*Jules Adler, 1865-1952.
Painting
under the Third Republic*
Silvana Editoriale, 2017
240 pages, 25 €
On sale at the mahJ
bookshop

* Only in French

► See also

Rosine Cahen. Drawings from the Great War

Echoes to Jules Adler's
work during the Great
War.
2nd floor, permanent collection

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Presented at the Museum of Fine Arts in Dole, at the Lumière Palace
in Evian and at the Musée La Piscine - André Diligent Museum of Art
and Industry in Roubaix, the exhibition is recognized as being of
national interest by the Ministry of Culture; As such, it has received
exceptional financial support from the State.

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des arts

TOUTE
L'HISTOIRE

Télérama