

The Maison Schuler, Rouault, Monet

The underground gallery is divided into three spaces and forms the first stage in an exploration of the museum's extension. From the outside, its presence is marked on the Place du Musée Unterlinden by the Maison ("house"), which functions as an architectural signature and a visual landmark for visitors. Between the Neo-Gothic façade of the entrance in the convent building and the Neo-Baroque façade of the administrative section, this piece of contemporary glass architecture reveals a vast, spartan, but light-filled space below, displaying three works from the museum's collection. Whilst the Maison is Herzog & de Meuron's signature, these three emblematic paintings have been chosen to symbolise the Musée Unterlinden's collection.



Théophile Schuler, *The Chariot of Death*, 1851, oil on Canvas

The first is the Strasbourg artist Théophile Schuler's monumental *Chariot of Death* (1851), which was painted in Paris after he had witnessed the 1848 Revolution. These events that rocked the capital had a profound impact on the painter, who returned to Strasbourg with a need to exorcise the violence he had seen. In the largest work he painted in his career, his pyramid-shaped composition recalls Delacroix's *Liberty Guiding the People*, painted during the 1831 Revolution. Schuler's allegory was inspired by tragic current events but also images of the Dance of Death produced in the Rhine region, particularly Holbein's version. Schuler shows the impassive figure of

death carrying away people from all social strata and all ages of life in his chariot drawn by its macabre horses. After a single exhibition in Strasbourg in 1851, Schuler, who was fascinated by the mystical reputation of the former Dominican convent of Unterlinden, decided to present his masterpiece to the Musée Unterlinden in 1862.



Georges Rouault, *The Child Jesus Among the Doctors*, 1894, oil on canvas

The second painting on display is *The Child Jesus Among the Doctors*, painted in 1894 by Georges Rouault when he was a pupil of Gustave Moreau at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. The subject is taken from the Gospel of St Luke (Luke 2 ; 41 – 48) and the episode in which the adolescent Jesus visited the temple of Jerusalem without his parents' knowledge to meet the doctors of the law. In the manner of Rembrandt, Rouault symbolically illuminates certain faces to provide a key to interpreting the work. The High Priest and the faces of the doctors are cloaked in shadows, whilst Christ appears with his face in a halo of light, as if transfigured, when confronted with the deformity of the interpreters of the law and the incomprehension of the scribes. The birth of the Church as a result of Christ's coming is represented by the group of worshippers gathered in the Gothic nave and the Virgin, who is reunited with her son at the far end of the scene. Rouault won the Prix Chenavard for the painting in 1894.

It was bought by the French state in 1917, which then deposited it with the Musée Unterlinden in 1919.



Claude Monet, *The Valley of the Creuse, Setting Sun*, 1889, oil on canvas

Finally, *The Valley of the Creuse* (1889) by the father of Impressionism Claude Monet symbolises both the avant-garde and the Musée Unterlinden's decision to embrace 20th century art.

The painting is one of the series of nine views of the valley (beside the Grande Creuse and at the confluence of the Petite Creuse) painted in Fresselines, where Monet stayed for three months in the spring of 1889, at the invitation of the poet Maurice Rollinat. The different versions are now held in private and public collections : in Paris (Musée Marmottan) and Reims, as well as outside France in Philadelphia, Boston and Chicago (United States), Wuppertal (Germany) and Mie (Japan). Monet's stay in the area gave him another opportunity to paint variations of light on the same subject, a procedure he had already used with the motif of the Gare Saint Lazare (1877) and later revisited in his depictions of Rouen Cathedral (1892 – 1894) and the Waterlilies (1899).

There are only minor variations in his viewpoint, but the intensity of light within the paintings is very different. With its touches of colour, the example in Colmar captures a flaming sunset that blazes even in the river. Instead of sharp outlines, the mountain is recomposed with shades

of colour ranging from dark green to red and ochre. Even the trees on the hillsides gleam with a new sparkle in the setting sun. But the reflections on the surface of the water are certainly the aspect that best translates the Impressionist ideal of capturing the ephemeral gleam of each coloured nuance diffracted by the light.

So the three works encapsulate the themes evoked by the Musée Unterlinden's collections - Rhineland mysticism, history and religion, and the 20th century avant-garde movements - but at the same time, they also symbolise the constant connections maintained by living artists with the State, and the desire to situate the Musée Unterlinden within tradition and modernity.