

Press Release

## Eugène Carrière. Sculpting Light

Hauser & Wirth Basel

28 August – 01 November 2025



### About the exhibition

As part of the Kunsttage Basel 2025, an exhibition dedicated to the renowned French Symbolist artist Eugène Carrière (1849 – 1906) opens at Hauser & Wirth's gallery in Basel, in cooperation with curator and art historian Helen Hirsch. 'Sculpting Light' spans 20 years of the artist's practice, from 1885 to ca. 1905, traversing some of the artist's best known subjects, from portraits and intimate depictions of mothers and children to landscapes. The exhibition explores these motifs through Carrière's conceptual use of light. As Hirsch writes: 'Carrière uses light as a metaphor for the inner light of the subject, for its aura. It is not just a stylistic device; it also has a symbolic function for the artist as an emblem of a person's inner vitality and charisma: their outer appearance is an expression of their inner light.' Seen through this lens, 'Sculpting Light' celebrates the work of an under-appreciated artist whose paintings endure for their remarkable originality.

### Text by Helen Hirsch, art historian and curator

Why do certain artists enjoy success during their lifetime and then disappear from public consciousness?

Many of the art movements at the turn of the 20th Century were short-lived. However, some left their mark and made an impression on artists of later generations. They are the pioneers of modernism. A wide range of ideas and thoughts give rise to new movements. At the same time, however, individual artists insist on their independence and their own form of expression. They do not adapt to changing times and tastes. Eugène Carrière is one of them.

Carrière was one of the most influential artists of his time in Paris, appreciated and respected by his contemporaries. On the one hand, he was established: an artist who had found his place in 19th-century bourgeois French society and who had a wide circle of friends, including the leading figures of the intellectual and artistic avant-garde of the time. His form of expression, independence and nonconformity toward trends of the time also earned him criticism.

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There is more to his works than the realistic portraits of fellow artists, intimate depictions of mothers and children, or landscapes as they appear at first glance. To understand his depictions, both then and now, it is necessary to know his biography and his philosophy of life. For contemporary viewers, the foggy depictions, the use of a monochrome color palette and the flowing figures in Carrière's works were unusual at a time when painting was becoming colorful and vibrant.

Carrière's early years of training (1869 and 1872 – 1877), which he spent with Alexandre Cabanel, were rich in experience. During this time, he mastered the basic techniques of painting. His quest for an art whose primary task was to 'awaken an understanding of nature and life in the soul'—an art of the soul whose means of expression were predetermined by the formal language of nature—led Carrière to change his technique around 1885. In doing so, he discarded everything he considered unimportant and superfluous. He synthesized forms in the spirit of empathy with a fundamental, natural language of form. Appearance and impression increasingly coincided. Color became less and less important: for the artist, it distorted the images. Carrière moved closer to the symbolist demands for monochromy.

Carrière's late stylistic phase became increasingly apparent from 1890 onwards. He used muted tones to create his works, producing a 'general mood of color' by applying darker, earthy colors to a lighter background. This earthy palette increasingly gained the upper hand in his work, interspersed with veils of dark ochre. In this way, he intensified the mystical and magical feeling in his paintings. His thoughts revolved around the allegorical representation of inner values. He was concerned with the exemplary expression of feelings as a sign of true and deep humanity, which he expressed above all in his many paintings of maternal love. In doing so, he strove to block out everything superfluous, all accessories, everything decorative or ornamental. The depiction of a person is reduced, as it were, beyond their individual features to their charisma, their aura. External conditions such as decor, household items or costumes are only hinted at or omitted entirely. His figures find themselves in a special, often spiritual atmosphere that is far removed from reality. Time, space and surroundings no longer play a role and are hardly depicted, if at all, using pictorial means.

The figures seem to be painted from memory. A transparent veil envelops the canvas, through which the figures seem to stand detached in space. This impression is reinforced by the absence of conventional lines. His special ability to make faces and bodies appear through light and shadow alone gives the viewer the feeling of form modeling. The figures do not appear as sharply defined silhouettes; they are modeled solely by their volume and shapes. It is not without reason that Carrière is called 'the sculptor among painters.' He worked like a sculptor who uses the effect of light and the shadows cast by forms when shaping a sculpture. This makes the figures appear in a state between reality and dream. Their faces no longer have worldly features; they are, to a certain extent, detached. The light does not remain on the surface, but rather flows through the faces, filling cavities and even dark shadows. The balance between light and shadow shifts in favor of darkness. The light becomes more fluid and dissolves. The external and internal worlds of the image flow together. The background swallows the light. Only delicate arabesques of light remain visible on the picture plane. Carrière speaks of the 'Valeurs arabesques de la lumière' that dominate the image.

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Carrière used light as a metaphor for the inner light of the subject, for his aura. It is not just a stylistic device; it also has a symbolic function for the artist as an emblem of a person's inner vitality and charisma. His outer appearance is an expression of his inner light; this radiates in a special way and creates an overall impression of the personality.

It is not surprising that Carrière and Auguste Rodin were lifelong friends and admired each other's art. Rodin was clearly influenced by Carrière, which can be seen in his (mainly marble) sculptures in the way the figures flow into one another and the soft features of the faces. Both men had great admiration for each other, which they also expressed in writing. Their friendship began around 1890, when they moved in the same artistic circles. They supported each other and defended their art against criticism. Carrière wrote the foreword and designed the poster for the catalog of the major Rodin exhibition in 1900. The two artists visited each other regularly and exchanged thoughts on art and life. Rodin was an avid collector of Carrière's art, as evidenced by the rich collection still on display at the Musée Rodin today.

The last creative period from 1895 onwards is characterized by increasing abstraction: individual facial features disappear; everything is reduced to the bone structure—the eyes, cheeks, nose, chin and forehead. In the group pictures, the figures are not just placed next to each other, they seem to flow together.

Carrière succeeded in captivating his contemporaries with his everyday themes and gained recognition during his lifetime. The titles of some of his works in the exhibition show how aptly he was able to capture the spirit of the times: 'Promenade à la campagne (Rêverie)' (1890), 'Maternité' (1899) and 'Femme regardant son enfant' (1900). His depictions, detached from reality, often describe states that represented goals and dreams for many people at that time: reverie, tenderness, meditation, sleep. It actually seems strange that these motifs appealed to the public at a time when inhumane urbanization was just beginning. However, it should be remembered that at the time people were already increasingly influenced by a longing for dream worlds (morphinism) and a return to immaterial values. It was the artists who were the first to pursue these longings and attempt to translate them into art. They explored every possibility of depicting states of mind detached from reality, dreams, myths and allegories, culminating in symbolism.

Carrière is represented in several major Swiss private and institutional collections. However, there have been no major exhibitions of his work in Switzerland to date. His participation in the joint exhibition at the Musée Rath in Geneva (1896), with works by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Auguste Rodin, was initiated by the Swiss painter Auguste Baud-Bovy and the art critic Mathias Morhardt. The exhibition at Hauser & Wirth's gallery in Basel raises awareness of the artistic output of an artist who, from today's perspective, created an astonishing and timeless body of work.

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### Hauser & Wirth Basel

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### Opening hours:

Tue – Fri, 2 pm – 6 pm  
Sat, 11 am – 4 pm

### Caption and courtesy information:

Eugène Carrière  
Le couple (The Couple)  
1890-1895 c.  
Oil on canvas  
55 x 46 cm / 21 5/8 x 18 1/8 in

Eugène Carrière  
Tête de femme (Étude pour Portrait de la famille Bernheim)  
(Head of a Woman (Study for Portrait of the Bernheim Family))  
1903-1905 c.  
Oil on canvas  
41 x 33 cm / 16 1/8 x 13 in

Eugène Carrière  
Femme au bracelet (Woman with Bracelet)  
1893-1896 c.  
Oil on canvas  
37.5 x 46 cm / 14 3/4 x 18 1/8 in  
Photo: Knöll Archives

Eugène Carrière  
Étude pour Maternité (Study for Maternity)  
1892 c.  
Oil on canvas  
33 x 41 cm / 13 x 16 1/8 in