



ARCHAEOLOGY OF FLUIDS

IN COLLABORATION WITH TONY OURSLER



MUSÉE

D'ART

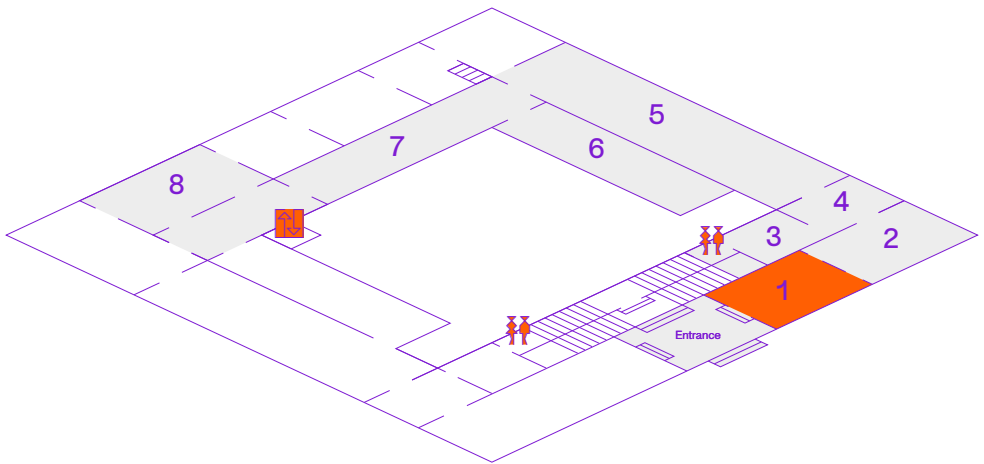
D'HISTOIRE

VISITOR'S GUIDE

For *Archaeology of Fluids*, the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Genève (MAH) has invited Pascal Rousseau to explore the power of art and objects and their capacity to captivate our attention. The art historian, along with the American artist Tony Oursler (1957*) and his amazing archives on the visual imagination of hypnotism, invite us to rediscover the museum's collection in a new light and emphasise our relationship to objects and their influence on our seeing. What is it that fascinates us about a work of art or an ordinary object? Can we travel across the space and time that separates us from its origin, whether near or far?

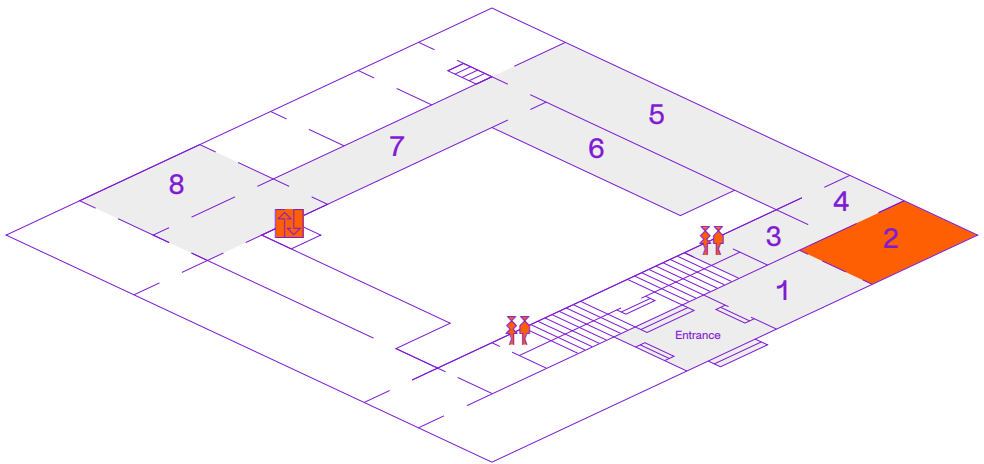
The metaverse and augmented reality are now revolutionising our perceptions, but these questions were already engaging Waldemar Deonna, who headed the MAH from 1920 to 1951. As a trained archaeologist with an eye on the innovations of the avant-garde, he combined methods and disciplines, embracing a mosaic of prehistory, palaeontology, art history and religion, the history of magic and techniques, and psychoanalysis and (para)psychology. This exhibition is inspired by his original

reflections on the power of art to transport us, even virtually, through eras via auras and halos, the magnetism of objects and the reanimation of images from the past, the hypnosis of seeing and the ecstasy of bodies. This hypnotic understanding of art finds a home in Geneva, where numerous studies on psychology and modified states of consciousness emerged at the dawn of the twentieth century.



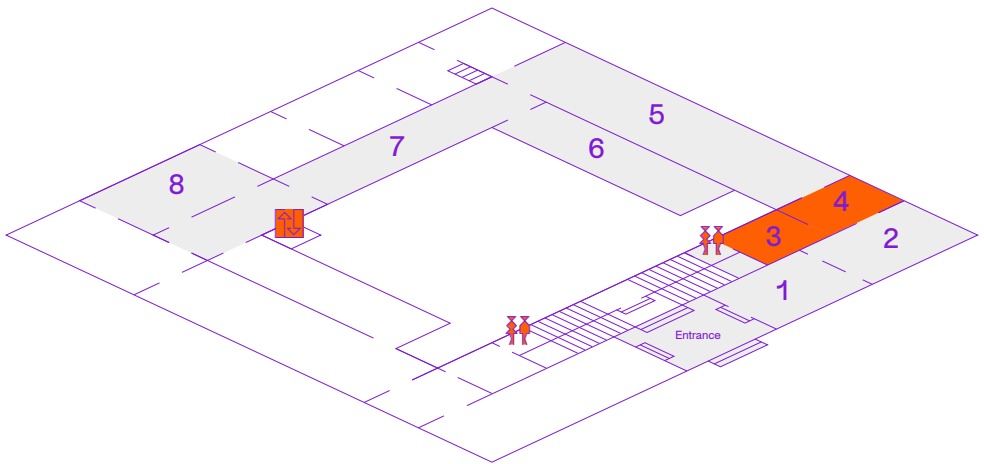
Room 1 – The Aura of Objects

For Waldemar Deonna, magical power emanating from the traditional brilliance of objects partly explains how they fascinate us. Light is a sign of power in the world. The exhibition invites you into a sanctuary that shines from everywhere. An archaeological relic is on the ground. It is an Egyptian sarcophagus with a golden colour, which illustrates the invisible influence of the “Other World.” During that era, gold was the only metal known not to oxidise, and thus serves here as a symbol of immortality. You are then guided towards a wall, an iconostasis, that presents visual codes from inside orthodox churches and brings together a series of icons and religious paintings from the MAH. The iconostasis at once reveals and hides. It is a passageway and a transition where the golden reflections of icons mediate between the sacred and profane, between Heaven and Earth. These religious figures converse and intermingle with gleaming objects from the MAH’s collections while Tony Oursler’s flashing lightbulb, *Talking Light*, turns light into a language that can be deciphered.



Room 2 – The Symbolism of Eyes

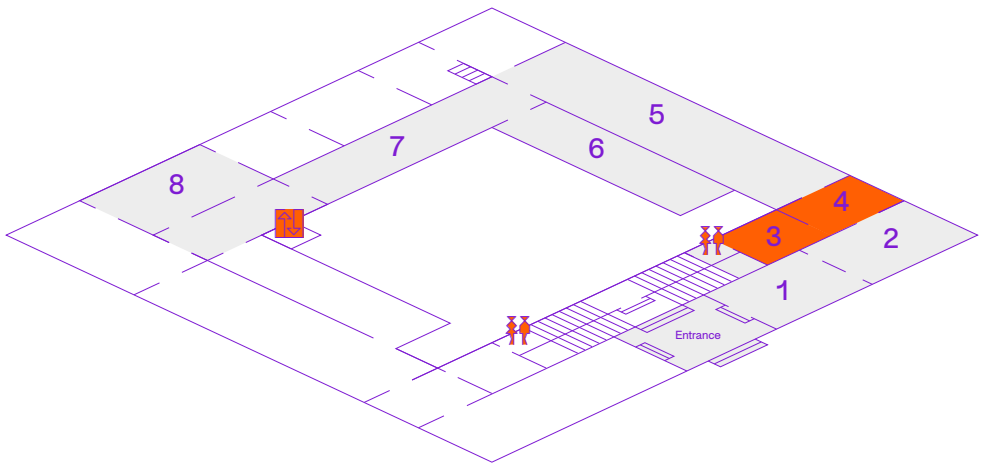
Passing through the doors of the iconostasis, you enter a second space in which the magnetic power of the eye and its symbolism come into play. In his final book, titled *Symbolisme de l'œil*, Waldemar Deonna analyses how the person is simplified to a head and then from the head to the eye, a kind of metonymy. Turning around, you discover objects in a mostly random order, spread out as if in the museum storerooms—masks, helmets, and funeral steles from the world of the Greeks and Egyptians, as well as the Genevan Escalade. You then roam into a forest of busts and eyes. A head from Antiquity is next to a carnival mask from the 1950s and Alberto Giacometti's *Bust of Annette* (1964). All these sculptures converge on the modern silence of Amedeo Mondigliani's painted portrait, *Hands Crossed* (1917). The absent stare becomes the common denominator of the supernatural magnetism of looking.



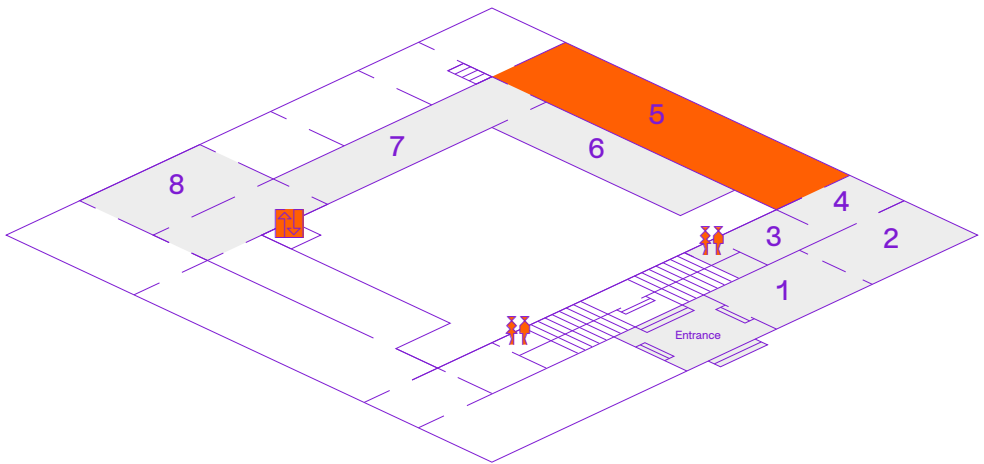
Rooms 3 and 4 – About Waldemar Deonna

The intermediary rooms are dedicated to Waldemar Deonna’s cultural universe. His many books and articles underline the connections between art from Antiquity and modern times—what’s ancient in the new but also what’s new in the ancient—all while presenting (para)psychological approaches to artistic creation.

In the historical display cases, archaeological objects from the collection converse visually with Deonna’s scholarly publications, which delightfully circumvent the strict parameters of his academic discipline. You can see original drawings from the Bibliothèque de Genève by Elise Müller, who is known as Hélène Smith. These are a reminder of Deonna’s interest in this young woman who claimed to communicate with spirits beyond the grave and into extraterrestrial worlds by depicting views of planet Mars.

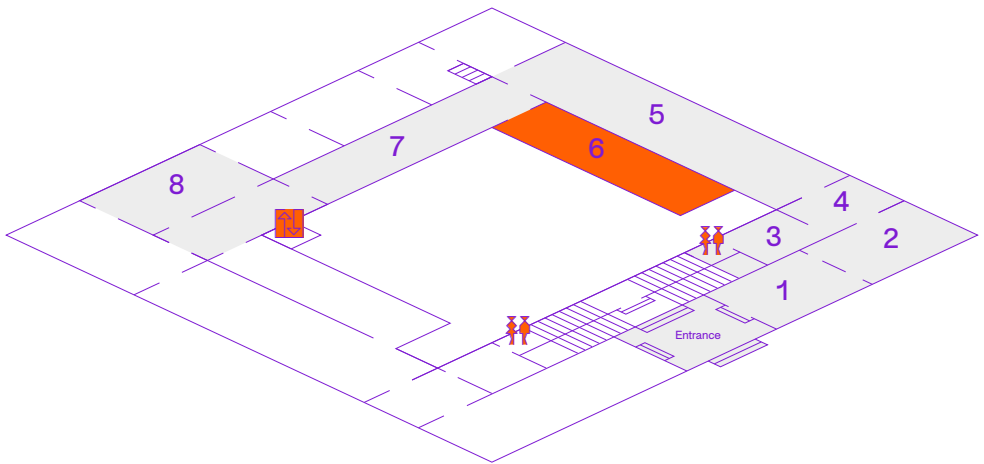


These imaginary voyages invite you to relive the memory of a buried past via the aesthetic experience of the museum. This experience existed well before virtual reality realised the great dream of ubiquity: to be both here and there at the same time, in the present and past. In the second gallery, we set out on a journey into Ancient Greece through photographs taken by Deonna and Fred Boissonnas. These are accompanied by a series of dancers practising rhythm as developed in the method at that time by Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, who was also fascinated by a return to original physical movement.



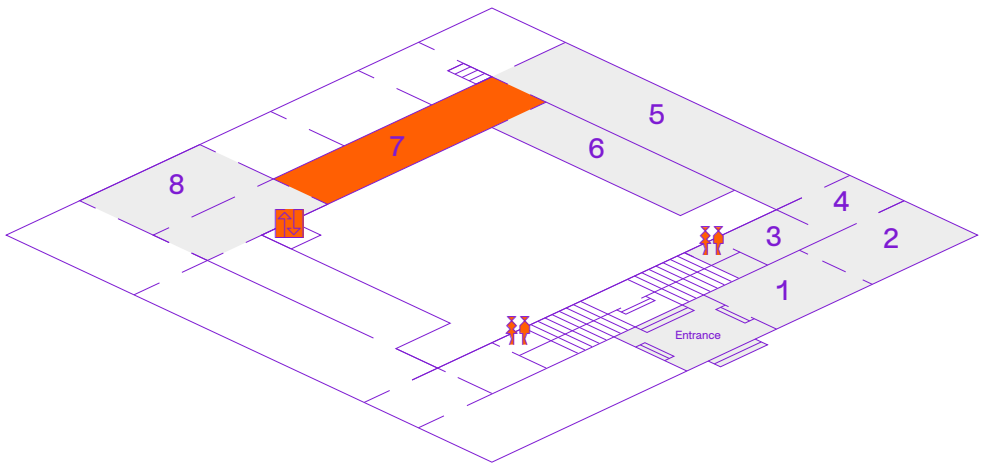
Room 5 – Art and Hypnosis

This large room inspired by Antiquity is ideal for a journey between Ancient Greece and modern Geneva. Objects and eras intermix in a visual dialogue between painting, sculpture, photography, and animated images to better re-actualise the past in the museum's décor through a hypnotic trance. The depictions of dance on Greek vases, which persuaded Deonna, could come alive through chronophotography to rekindle the rhythms of ancient ballets, and echo Fred Boissonnas' original photographs of the dancer Magdeleine Guipet for the book *L'Art et l'hypnose* by the hypnotist Émile Magnin. This series of photographs is shown here for the very first time. According to Magnin, the young woman under hypnosis touched into primal, expressive movements. Her dancing inspired the Symbolist painters, including Ferdinand Hodler, who adopted one of her poses for *Distant Chant* and presented a choreographed sequence in *Woman in Ecstasy* (1911) and *Looking into Infinity* (1913–1915).



Room 6 – Tony Oursler, *State_Nonstate*

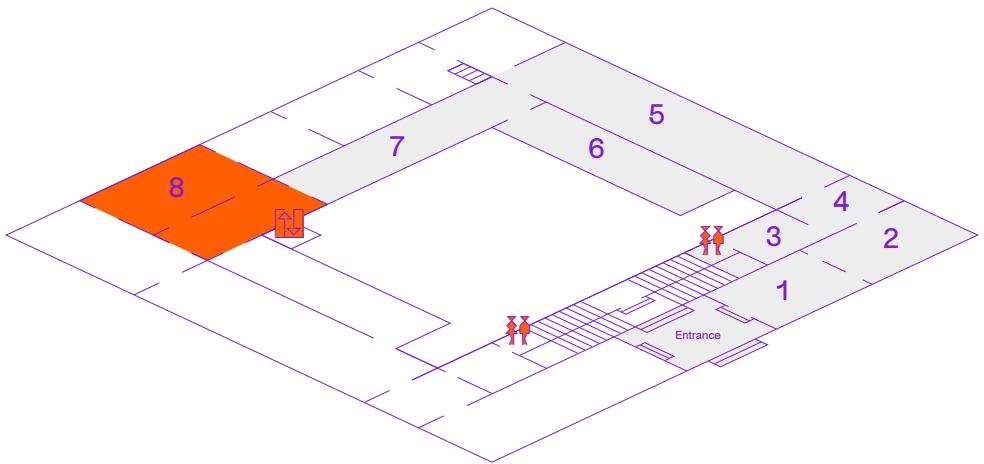
This part of the exhibition returns to the connections between visual art and hypnosis, with the collaboration of the American artist Tony Oursler, an international figure in multimedia art. In *State_Nonstate*, an installation consisting of some dozen pieces in which sculpture and video interact, Oursler draws from the historical iconography of hypnosis, which is in dialogue with the more current symbols of our media environment. You will find Franz Mesmer and his drawing of a donkey hypnotising a patient, as well as the Magnetic Tree, which refers to the tree that Pyséгур entranced and to which patients were connected for healing. In his masterful, immersive installation, Oursler investigates the relationships that bond fascination, hypnosis, and attention in a modern phantasmagoria.



Room 7 – Tony Oursler, *Hypnoflowers*, 2020

Here, Tony Oursler presents a two-fold chronology indicating the milestones of the history of hypnosis and technology. On the other wall, the artist exhibits the series *Hypnoflowers* (2020), in which he draws colourful flowers above scenes of trance. They're rendered in grey pencil to better embody their spectral state. Rather than accessing the characters' unconscious, the overlay of plant motifs opens into another unexpected and disjointed reality.

In 1995, the artist talked about his love of flowers: "One day out in a field, I saw a flower break apart, some of its petals blew away on the warm wind. I was horrified, then sad to witness the violent destruction of the wonderful yellow bloom. . . . To my delight, I saw that the petals were alive and realised that this was a butterfly and not part of a dying flower. In fact, the delicate creature was helping bring life to the flowers by pollinating them! This shocking emotional experience so devastated me that I have been forced to confront its meaning and the power which flowers seem to lord over me."



Room 8 – Oursler Archives

The personal archives of American artist Tony Oursler are dedicated to the supernatural and occultism and include a true treasure of more than twelve hundred photographs. There are publications and unique objects related to magic, the paranormal, phantasmagoria, pseudo-science, and technology. These documents trace a social, cultural, and intellectual history dating back to the early eighteenth century. For the MAH, the artist is presenting, for the first time, his fabulous collection devoted to the visual history of hypnotism from Mesmer to today. For the artist, these archives also reflect a surprising family history. A part of the collection was, in fact, inherited from the artist's grandfather, Charles Fulton Oursler, the famous author and publisher from the early twentieth century, who was also a magician in his spare time, a leading figure in the movement to demystify fraudulent spiritualists, and friends with the great magician Harry Houdini and Arthur Conan Doyle, among others.

One of Oursler's internationally recognised *Puppets* concludes the exhibition trajectory. In a state of catalepsy, she symbolises the archetypal image of hypnosis. She evokes both the past and present in her face, which consists of a projected video. The artist continues to surprise visitors by presenting a final piece in the next room...



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