

## 200 franc banknote: Charles Ferdinand Ramuz, 1878—1947 Writer

The work of Charles Ferdinand Ramuz impresses by its diversity and sophistication. It is characterised by high aesthetic standards and a profound commitment to the truth. During his lifetime Ramuz was often - incorrectly - classified as a regional author, even though his artistic commitment and critical analysis of the classical French mode of expression put him ahead of his time. Today, Ramuz is regarded as a modern writer who renewed the formal structure of the novel. He is certainly one of the greatest French-Swiss authors of the 20th century.

### Human destiny and symbolic landscapes

The volume of poems, *Le Petit village* (1903), and the early novels, *Aline* (1905), *Jean-Luc persecute* (1909), *Aimé Pache, peintre vaudois* (1911) and *Vie de Samuel Belet* (1913) depict simple people who are undone by their hopes and desires. Later, Ramuz turned to more mythical themes, but he continued to paint powerful human characters and remained true to his love of realistic descriptions and landscape images. The novels written after 1914 owe much to the Vaud and Valais regions. In *La Beauté sur la terre* (1927; *Beauty on Earth*) and *Le Garçon savoyard* (1936) lakes play a key role, while in *La Grande peur dans la montagne* (1926, *Terror on the Mountain*), *Farinet ou la fausse monnaie* (1932), *Derborence* (1934, *When the Mountain fell*) and *Si le soleil ne revenait pas* (1937) mountains are a central theme. Yet Ramuz' superbly drawn landscapes are never an end in themselves. They serve as the setting for treatments of human beings and their destinies. The focus is always on man and his struggle.

### Originality of form

The formal originality of Ramuz' work finds expression in the varying of narrative perspective and the use of images and similes that harmonise with the rural characters depicted in his works. Like the highly admired Cézanne in his painting, Ramuz sought to express universal truths through literature. He believed that art did not simply reflect existing reality, but that by building its own world it created a new reality. The form of expression with which this was achieved was more important to Ramuz than the content, and this led him to a stylistic audacity that could irritate and even shock his contemporary readers.

### Modernity

In his theoretical writings and in the essays *Taille de l'homme* (1933) and *Besoin de grandeur* (1937) Ramuz examines the close connection between staying true to realism and having a commitment to human values and ideals. This shows clearly how Ramuz' representation of the particular always points towards the general. The particular is the point of departure, the raw material from which the human element is artistically fashioned, and which at the same time must prevent the writer from losing himself in the dizzy heights of the abstract. Religious and political questions affecting people in the modern world are discussed without prejudice in Ramuz' essays and diaries.

### International recognition

The great French writers of his time very quickly accepted Ramuz as an equal. Well-known personalities such as Paul Claudel and André Gide expressed their enduring admiration and affinity for him. In Claudel's words (as early as 1925), Ramuz was "most gifted and possessed of imaginative power. Through him, style is undergoing a renewal. He is content only when working on the grandest subjects. He has a sense of the truly tragic in human life."

## Chronology

1878	Charles Ferdinand Ramuz was born on September 24 in Lausanne.
1894 - 1896	Secondary schooling in Lausanne.
1896 - 1897	Spends a year in Karlsruhe. Decides to become a writer. First poems.
1897 - 1903	Studies language and literature in Lausanne and Paris.
1903	A first book of poetry, <i>Le Petit village</i> , appears.
1903 - 1904	Tutor in Weimar in the home of the Russian Count Maurice Prozor.
1904 - 1914	Lives mainly in Paris, where he discovers his personal expressive power and identity as a writer of French-speaking Switzerland. A time of prolific literary production.
1913	Marriage to the Neuchâtel painter Cécile Cellier. Birth of daughter Marianne.
1914 - 1918	Returns to Lausanne. Publishes the <i>Cahiers vaudois</i> , a monthly literary journal. The first issue contains Ramuz' famous essay, <i>Raison d'être</i> .
1918	Premiere of <i>L'Histoire du soldat</i> , a melodrama, with lyrics by Charles Ferdinand Ramuz, music by Igor Stravinsky and sets by René Auberjonois.
1919 - 1939	Publication of some 30 works, among them some of the major novels. Growing fame in Switzerland and abroad, especially in France, where he is published by Grasset.
1936	Receives literary award from the Schiller Foundation.
1947	Ramuz died on May 23 in Pully, near Lausanne.