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The Bourbaki Panorama has a new splendour

Edouard Castres' giant painting in the Lucerne Panorama had been neglected for many years. This piece of art was almost in a state of decay when it was finally declared a work of national importance at the end of the 1970s and placed under a cantonal and federal preservation order. Now, following its restoration, it has a new splendour again. By Heinz Eckert

In the early hours of 1 February 1871 and during the day that followed, a total of 87,847 French soldiers, including 2,467 officers, with 11,000 horses, 11,150 transport carriages, 285 canons, 72,000 rifles and 64,000 bayonets crossed the Swiss border at four points in the Jura.

Around 33,500 soldiers arrived in the small town of Les Verrières alone, while a further 54,000 men entered Switzerland at Sainte-Croix, Jougne and Saint-Cergues in the Vaud Jura under freezing temperatures with heavy snow.

Poorly equipped and weakened by cold and hunger, the French Army of the East under General Bourbaki sought protection in Switzerland from their Prussian adversaries immediately after signing the border-crossing agreement close to the end of the Franco-Prussian War. The French had been faced with a choice – either to continue fighting or to surrender to the Prussians. So, Bourbaki's successor, General Clinchant, sought refuge in Switzerland for his exhausted and sick soldiers. Switzerland therefore saved the French troops from futile carnage. Three thousand Swiss soldiers were called to the Jura to meet the humbled battalions.

Having been disarmed, the French were sent from Les Verrières without escort to Fleurier, where soldiers from Valais were waiting for them. Red Cross trains provided the transport. Never-ending columns of soldiers from Bourbaki's army poured into Switzerland for more than 48 hours.

The internees were distributed throughout all the cantons with the exception of Ticino. Edouard Castres was a well-known artist of the day from Geneva who gave up his studio at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War to register as a helper with the French Red Cross. Castres was with Bourbaki's army when it was forced into Switzerland and had witnessed the misery of war. Deeply affected by the atrocities of the con-

flict, Edouard Castres returned to Paris after the war where he expressed his experiences through his art. Shortly afterwards, Castres was commissioned by a Belgian panorama company to produce a circular painting of the capitulation of Bourbaki's soldiers in the Swiss Jura.

In 1881, with the help of a group of outstanding artists – Ferdinand Hodler among them – Castres completed the circular painting, which was 14 metres in height with a circumference of 112 metres. The panorama was unveiled in Geneva on 24 September 1881.

The Bourbaki Panorama was exhibited in Geneva for eight years, from 1881 to 1889.



The Panorama cultural centre.

As visitor numbers started to fall, Benjamin Henneberg, who had acquired the panorama from the Belgian company, decided to take the circular painting to a new audience. The choice of Lucerne for the building of a new panorama had been planned there for some time to mark the 500th anniversary celebration of the Battle of Sempach in 1885. Lucerne's Wey district, close to the court chapel and lake, was chosen as the location.



Wartime drama: details provided by the Bourbaki circular painting.



The Lucerne Panorama remained in the possession of Henneberg, who came from Geneva, until 1925. The entire building complex was then sold to a Lucerne transport company which had no intention of maintaining the panorama business. Quite the opposite, in fact: a garage was to be installed in the large building. As Edouard Castres' 1100-metre-squared painting was still a tourist attraction at the time and still generating income, only the ground floor was converted. The Castres painting was firstly shortened from the bottom and hung higher. In 1949, another floor was added to the garage and the panorama painting was

reduced in size again to make way for a spare parts store. Atmospheric sky and lots of ground were lost forever. The panorama building in this prime business location in Lucerne was clearly becoming a burden to its owner. The property could have been sold on a number of occasions at a high price, and the income from the admissions was a long way short of covering the urgently required renovation of the building and the circular painting. Castres' work was illuminated by daylight through a glass roof. The changes in temperature had caused the glass to crack and rainwater seeping through had left dreadful marks on the painting.

The canvas had also started to come apart over the course of time, with holes appearing in it.

In 1979, an "Association for the Preservation of the Bourbaki Panorama" was set up, which succeeded in raising public awareness of the "unique historical document". With a non-reimbursable contribution of a million Swiss francs from the city of Lucerne and an interest-free loan of a further million, the association was able to purchase the property and arrange for a rudimentary restoration of the circular painting.

In 1991, it was assumed that the painting could be taken down for restoration. However, its condition at the time made this impossible, ruling out a change of location. National and international experts also advocated the preservation of rotundas and circular paintings in their entirety.

After ambitious plans to reconstruct the panorama building with a view to making Castres' painting the centrepiece of a new art museum were abandoned in 1991 owing to a lack of funding, a new solution emerged in 1994. The Lucerne city library housing the main office of the library association – for which a new location had been sought for some time – would get a new home in the completely renovated panorama building together with the panorama painting, a small panorama museum and the "panorama culture" rooms previously put to other uses. Lucerne would get a new cultural centre for CHF 20 million, which should be self-financing, meaning running costs would have to be met by rental income from the space on the ground floor.

The Lucerne electorate approved a CHF 14 million loan, while the remaining CHF 6 million was provided by patrons. The building was completely renovated and the painting restored between 1996 and 2004. The forecourt was also completed at the beginning of March this year, when the new panorama was officially inaugurated.



The arrival of Bourbaki's defeated army in Les Verrières: Edouard Castres' painting is an historical work of art of national and international importance.