

Swiss National Museum : history of Switzerland retold

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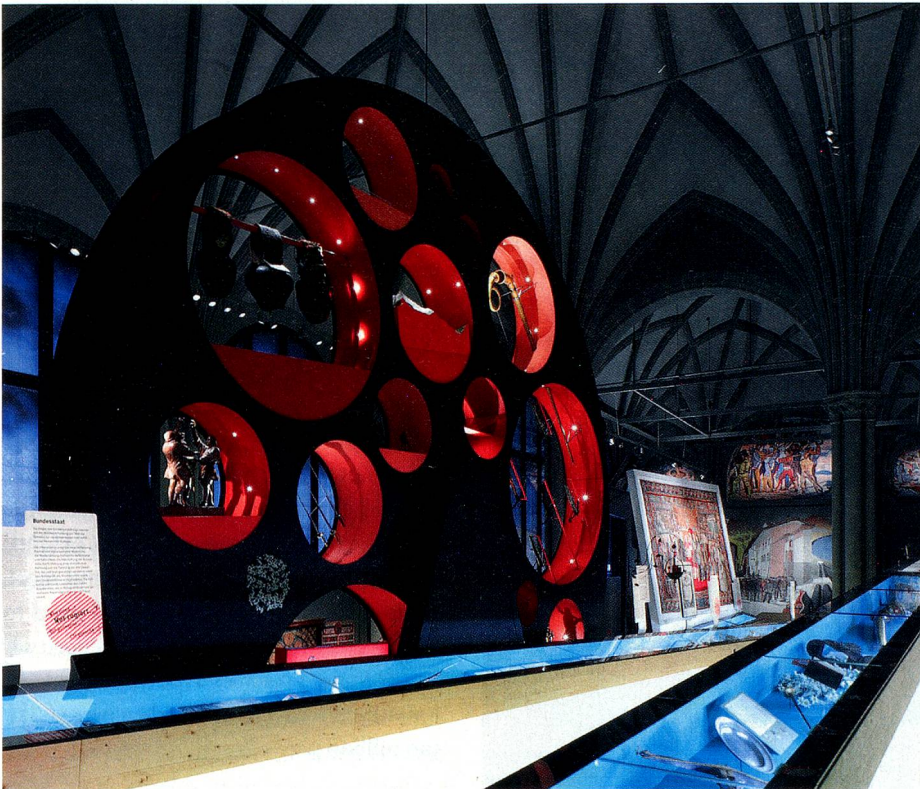
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History of Switzerland retold

The Swiss National Museum has taken advantage of the renovation of its historic building in Zurich to give its permanent exhibitions a facelift. The new-look museum presents the complete history of Switzerland in a modern and attractive style without any sentimentality. By Heinz Eckert



The 'Wheel of Myths' from the History of Switzerland

The Swiss National Museum, which is dedicated to the history of Switzerland, has become a piece of history in its own right. The large building behind Zurich's main station, reminiscent of a fairytale castle, was built in 1898 by architect Gustav Gull in a historicising late medieval style. Once slated for demolition, it now ranks as a national historic monument and has been extensively renovated.

In a sense, the renovation of the historic building has also restored the museum's original function. Director Andreas Spillmann wanted the new concept for the permanent exhibitions to revive the institution's original role as a museum of history as well as arts and crafts. Consequently, the refurbished 'station wing' – housing the 'Hall of Pillars' on the ground floor and the 'Hall of Fame' on the upper floor – is now home to two new-look permanent exhibitions on the main themes of history as well as arts and crafts.

The permanent exhibition 'History of Switzerland' focuses on settlement and migration, religious and intellectual history, political history, and economic development from the Stone Age to the present day. The first part of the exhibition, entitled 'No one has been here all the time', lays the historical foundations. By examining migration and settlement patterns it explains how Switzerland's topography has influenced its demographic development, showing how much the country has been influenced – and continues to be influenced – by migrants, often fleeing political or religious persecution.

The second part of the exhibition, 'Faith, diligence and order', looks at the religious and intellectual history of the country, and examines the change in attitudes towards religion: from the omnipresence of God and the unity of faith through the Reformation to the relativisation of religion during the Enlightenment. Visitors can see precious

medieval artefacts including chalices, statues of saints and sacred objects from the convent of St. Katharinenthal. From the Reformation and Counter-Reformation there are sculptures from the iconoclastic period and portraits of the reformers Zwingli and Calvin, while the numerous objects relating to the Catholic reaction include a 16th-century monstrance. The exhibition then moves on to the Enlightenment, with furnishings from a living room, and the educational reform of the 19th century.

The third part, 'Through conflict to concordance', is housed in the Hall of Fame and portrays the political history of modern Switzerland. It explains the Swiss consociational system of government, how it came into being, and the origins of today's federal state. The main feature in the centre of the room is the 9-metre-high 'Wheel of Myths', which references a number of perennial national myths including Heidi, the Federal Charter (the supposed founding document of the Swiss Confederation), an alphorn and a crossbow. The historical narrative also includes the women's and workers' rights movements, Switzerland's role in the two world wars, and the move away from the isolation in which the country found itself at the end of the Second World War.

Finally, the fourth part of the exhibition, 'Switzerland becomes rich abroad', tells the story of the country's economic development. Luxury watches, quality textiles, the impressive range of products manufactured by the chemical industry and masterpieces of mechanical engineering all bear witness to Switzerland's tremendous and successful economic growth. The exhibition also takes a look at Switzerland as a financial centre and the tourist attraction of the Alps, which have always ranked highly on the list of key Swiss 'exports'.

The journey through Swiss history ends with a 'Salon de réflexion' where news items from all over the world and an object of the month remind visitors that, far from being an abstract subject considered in isolation, history is a living thing that is still being written – all over the world, including Switzerland.

The museum in Zurich houses the largest collection of cultural artefacts in Switzerland. The permanent exhibition includes around one million exhibits of national significance from all eras of history.

www.landesmuseum.ch