

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 49 (2022)
Heft: 3

Rubrik: Images : Federal Palace to be completed at last

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Federal Palace to be completed at last

Anyone who knows what a tympanum is can skip the following few lines. For those who don't know, it is a lavishly decorated semi-circular or triangular wall surface over an entrance, door or window. Tympanums originally adorned the triangular gables of ancient columned Greek temples. The Federal Palace in Berne also has a tympanum above its entrance, albeit a very plain-looking one.

Typical Swiss understatement, you may think. But this is not the case. After its opening in 1902, the Federal Palace was simply never completed. The omission is fairly inconspicuous; most people probably think the tympanum was left like this on purpose. In reality, the original Federal Palace design shown at the 1896 national exhibition in Geneva had a tympanum filled with all manner of protagonists and symbols celebrating the Swiss nation.

After well over a century, the gap will soon be filled in. Renée Levi, a Swiss artist who specialises in painting and installations, is masterminding the project. She plans to cover the tympanum in a mosaic of 246 triangular, quadrangular and pentagonal ceramic panels. Grooved and finely glazed, the panels will reflect the ever-changing natural and artificial light of its surroundings. For Levi, this dazzling work of art is meant as a tribute to Tilo Frey (1923–2008), one of the first 12 women – and the first black woman – to be elected to the National Council in 1971. The Federal Palace, built in an era when women's suffrage was still inconceivable, will now be getting the feminine touch after all.

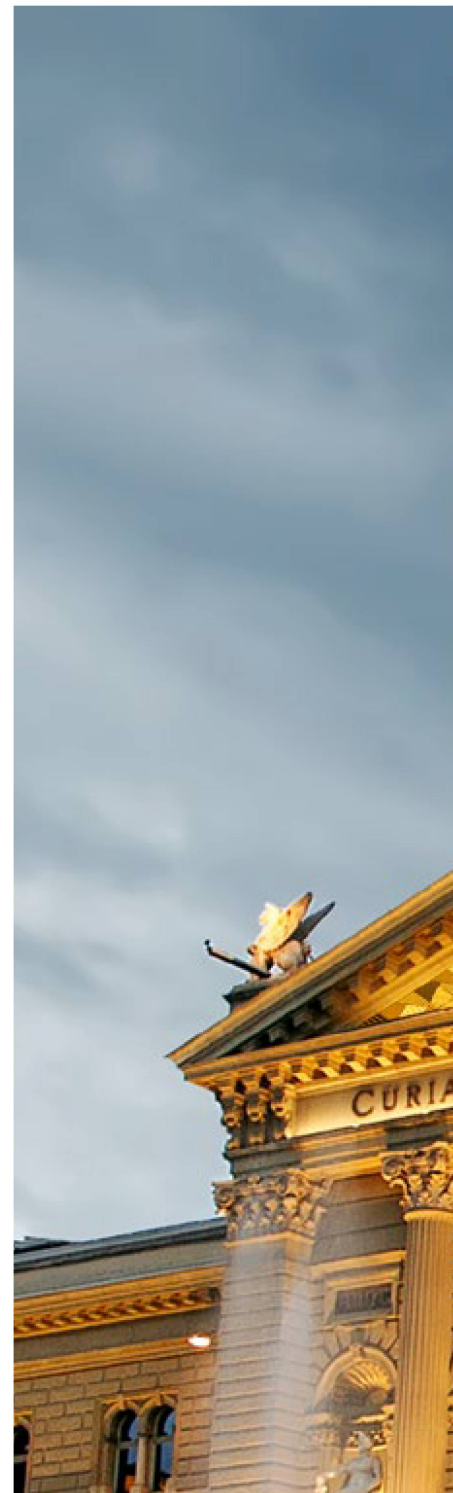
Levi's piece will be unveiled on 12 September 2023 – the 175th anniversary of the Federal Constitution. Curious to know why the mosaic consists of 246 ceramic panels? You can impress your friends on the big day by explaining that there are 246 members of parliament. All the panels are of a similar size, all have corners and edges, and all are clearly delineated. And although their inner grooves vary, the 246 panels form a seamless whole.

MARC LETTAU

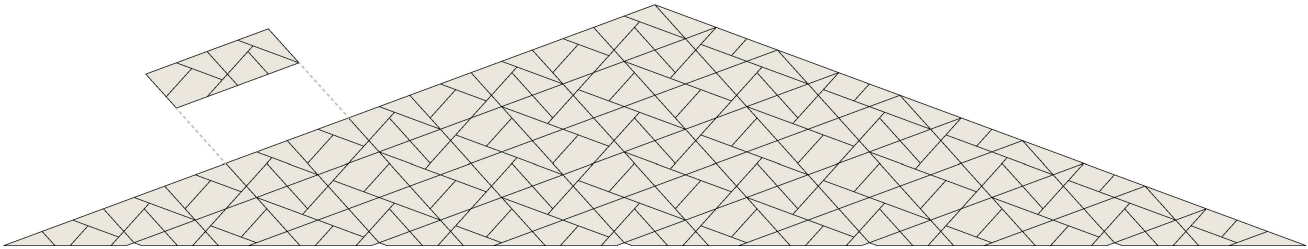


The Federal Palace tympanum currently consists of plain sandstone blocks. Its original design was a lavish piece of artwork celebrating the Swiss nation, but the plans were never executed.

This corrugated cardboard mock-up brings the artistic idea to life. With grooves pointing in different directions, the panels will reflect and disrupt the ever-changing light. This will turn the building's imposing static facade into something altogether more fluid.



The new Federal Palace tympanum will feature 246 finely glazed ceramic panels joined together – symbolising the 246 seats in the two parliamentary chambers.



Professor Renée Levi is an architect and artist who has been teaching fine art and painting at the Basel Academy of Art and Design since 2001. Levi is known for her large art installations, developing a work that focuses on the perception of space using colours that are often very bright. www.reneelevi.ch