

Cultural life in Switzerland

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CULTURAL LIFE IN SWITZERLAND

By Dr. F. HUBER-RENFER

The Collegiate Library of St. Gall.

If I ask you, to-day, to accompany me once more on a visit to St. Gall, this is because, in addition to the Collegiate Church, there exists another building there, which is just as deserving of our attention, as the former. I am thinking of the Collegiate Library, which, together with all the treasures that it houses, is perhaps even more famous than the Cathedral itself. The fact that it contains manuscripts dating from the eighth and even from the seventh century, which have been written by the monks of St. Gall, shows us that, already from the very beginning, the principle adopted by the monastery was "claustrum sine armario quasi castrum sine armentario", which put into plain English means that a monastery without a book cupboard is like a fortress without an armoury. This love for books and for their preservation goes back primarily to the fact that in the Year of Our Lord 745, the first Abbot Otmar, placed the monastery under the Benedictine Rule, which lays the duty of reading Holy Scripture upon its monks. It was for this reason that parts of the Old and of the New Testament, as well as works relating to the history of the Church, to natural science and to jurisprudence, were copied by the monks. Such real Masters in the art of writing, as Winitar, Wandelgar, Kero and others, devoted years and decades of their lives to the copying of Holy Books. The rapidly increasing prosperity of the Order made it possible to promote cultural possessions, and the contents of the library grew apace. In the year 830, the Abbot Gozbert gave the library a building of its own. The first Chapter Catalogue, which dates from that period, shows us what treasures had been collected during two centuries. Among them, some rare Irish manuscripts occupy a place of honour. Three of the most precious manuscripts date from just before the year 872. One of these is the Folchart Psalter, of which the initials, richly decorated with gold and silver, shows a decided Irish influence, whereas, for instance, a beautiful, full-page initial "D", illuminated in gold on a crimson background, recalls to mind the Carolingian Renaissance. In the "Psalterium aureum", the entire text is written in gold. Still more famous is the "Evangelium longum", the Long Gospel. Its initials, decorated with gold and silver scrolls, are the work of the monk Sintram, whose skilful fingers were an object of admiration to all on this side of the Alps — as was stated by the monk Ekkehard. What a pity it is, my dear reader, that I am not connected with you at the present moment by means of a television set, as had this been the case, then I could have shown you some of these masterpieces, and chiefly among them I would have liked you to see the lovely ivory tablets, made by Tutilo, which serve as a binding for the Gospel in question. Within a beautiful, finely carved mandorla, we find Christ enthroned and surrounded by two cherubims and by the Apostles. Richly chiselled, gilded silver plates frame the ivory tablets. Uncut precious stones, arranged in little arcades, enhance the already inestimable value of this treasure.

It would be fascinating, if one could speak of the brilliant history of the Monastery under the sway of the Ekkehards and Notkerns, for this was also the

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