

LA SUISSE.
C'EST
QUOI?

 Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

 Eidgenössisches Departement des Innern EDI
Département fédéral de l'intérieur DFI
Departamento Federal do Interior DFI

MUSEUM

NAZIUNAL SVIZZER. MUSEO NAZIO
NALE SVIZZERO. SCHWEIZERISCHE
S NATIONALMUSEUM. MUSÉE NAT
IONAL SUISSE. **Château de Prangins.**

New permanent exhibition – What is Switzerland?

From 18 June 2022

OVERVIEW OF THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition starts and finishes with the voices of young people aged 12 to 15, thanks to a close collaboration with schools in Prangins, Gland and Morges: they tell us what Switzerland means to them, what they expect from it, and their hopes for its future. Each has also picked out a favourite object from the exhibition and explains the reason for their choice. Their comments in the audio recordings question some of the certainties surrounding this little country. Afterwards, visitors are invited to adopt a similar approach, as they explore the six themes covered through almost 300 objects of many kinds.

The exhibition opens with a panorama by the illustrator Mix & Remix which humorously catalogues some of the myths and clichés of Switzerland: cleanliness, safety, prosperity, precision and democracy, not forgetting snow-capped peaks, tax evasion, fondue and chocolate! Some of these are the starting point for topics that are examined through the daily lives of people from the 18th century to the 20th, recounting a history of Switzerland that is less peaceful than might be supposed.

In search of identity

18th-century Switzerland, with its Alps, watercourses and shepherds living a frugal life, exerts a fascination on foreign tourists who see it as a “lost paradise”. Although it is a patchwork of territories with varying and unequal political status – the country does not become a federal state until 1848 – this idyllic image serves to forge a national identity in the centuries that follow, calling on the emblematic figures of William Tell and Helvetia to create a narrative that blends history with legend.

Popular festivals, with yodelling, stone throwing and wrestling, followed later by national exhibitions extolling both tradition and innovation, foster a sense of belonging among the population at large.

By the national exhibition of 1964, which is held at a time of economic boom and greater openness to the world, the focus is shifting from self-celebration towards a critical examination of how Switzerland works and its traditional values, with greater scope for artistic creations. Today, Switzerland’s authorities and people are still debating the nature of their nation: is it a prosperous “island” at the heart of Europe that is dedicated to self-preservation, or a neutral country that sees itself as a place of refuge and welcome?

Château de Prangins.

Peak time!

In the 18th and 19th centuries, with the rise of tourism, the Swiss mountains become an economic asset and object of study for topographers as well as a national symbol of freedom. Scholars seeking scientific advances fuel the vogue for the peaks and glaciers with their research reports, and the theme is soon taken up by numerous artists and photographers. Mountaineers, initially from abroad, set out to conquer the highest summits. By the end of the 19th century, Switzerland is drawing thousands of visitors to its mountains, lakes, peaks and valleys. Railways and funiculars are constructed to transport them, while newly built hotels offer accommodation for the night. Champions of the unspoilt countryside are already deeply concerned. Nevertheless, resorts continue to develop, opening up to mass tourism in the 1970s. Today, against the backdrop of climate change, the fear is that the glaciers and snows will disappear.

Free and liberated?

The family and the school system are pillars of the state, instilling values, social norms and cultural practices. In the second half of the 18th century, the model of a union between a man and woman of equal social standing begins to change: future spouses aspire more to a love match, with children who are wanted and enjoy the attentive care of their parents.

This era of secularisation sees a stronger distinction than hitherto between the sexes, supported by the medical profession, which accords distinct and complementary roles to men and women: the latter in charge of looking after the home, the former providing for the family's financial needs. This ideal is conveyed by the bourgeois elites and will endure until the "revolution" of May 1968.

A food revolution!

The clichéd image is of Switzerland as a mountainous nation whose people live solely from agricultural produce. The truth is very different. By the 17th century, Swiss citizens are already playing a leading role in Europe's financial centres and investing large amounts of capital in international commerce. Although Switzerland did not possess colonies, wealthy figures such as these are heavily involved in the wholesale trade in exotic goods – coffee, tea, cocoa and sugar – which, it should be remembered, is based on the slave trade.

Switzerland's railway network, which lags far behind the rest of Europe, also receives investment from these financiers. As a consequence, new lines are laid in the last quarter of the 19th century, allowing colonial produce to be transported to the countryside, and ushering in a radical change in the population's eating habits.

At the same time, the Swiss food industry begins producing packaged products, such as bars of milk chocolate. This invention by Daniel Peter proves hugely successful outside Switzerland, and comes to be seen as one of that typically Swiss food industry's flagship products.

Château de Prangins.

Thereafter, ease of storage and use decline in importance: issues of fair trade and recycling the mountains of waste generated by the industry are uppermost in the minds of both manufacturers and, especially, non-profit associations such as ZeroWaste Switzerland. In the exhibition, a single jar containing the non-recyclable waste accumulated by a family over the space of a year serves to encapsulate the determined efforts made by some in Switzerland to drastically reduce their ecological footprint.

A time for work and a time for leisure

Until the early 19th century, Switzerland remains a highly agricultural country prone to famines and shortages. To supplement their modest income, many peasants have machines for spinning cotton or flax at home.

Then, over the course of the following decades, Switzerland undergoes an industrial boom. Factories spring up in the countryside, and a large section of the workforce moves from agriculture to the industrial sector. Their ability to organise their time at home as they wish is replaced by the regimented, controlled routine of the production room.

Many women and school-age children are employed in the factories as cheap labour. It is not until 1874, with the second Federal Constitution, that education for children of school age is made compulsory; this is followed in 1877 by the Factories Act, a landmark piece of legislation giving children a degree of social protection for the first time. It limits the working day to 11 hours and prohibits children below the age of 14 from working.

Between 1895 and 1913, the Swiss economy booms, and bosses need more workers. Foreign labourers, especially from Germany and Italy, come to work in Switzerland, fuelling the demands of the labour movement, which begins using strikes as a way of securing improved working conditions: higher wages, shorter working hours, social protection and the like.

With the economic prosperity of the 1960s comes the consumer society and, concomitantly, a change in attitudes to work: now, people cease to define themselves solely as a function of their job, but also want time off to enjoy their leisure pursuits.

Château de Prangins.

Rights to happiness

Switzerland is regarded by some as the “world’s oldest democracy”, but in reality it did not become a constitutional state until quite recently, in 1848. In the mid-19th century, the founding fathers of the new federal state – liberals for the most part – do not establish the kind of direct participatory rights supported by the radicals.

The right to vote, for example, remains a hotly debated topic throughout the century, and the elites apply pressure to limit it on the basis of economic, religious and gender criteria. Elements of this discrimination will continue right up until 1971, at which point insolvent people are permitted to participate in political life. The same goes for half the population – Switzerland’s female citizens – who have to wait until that year to receive the vote. Even today, at the federal level, some categories of the population – such as foreigners – do not have the right to vote or stand for election, a further subject of public debate. A display case containing an impressive collection of hats, both institutional and civilian, pays tribute to citizens who, for too long, were deprived of an essential right.

The rights to organise popular initiatives and referendums also contribute to the image of a democratic nation. Introduced in the late 19th century, they transform Switzerland into a republic with an unprecedented set of democratic instruments enabling the electorate to take a stand against a political majority – albeit in the face of opposition from parts of the Swiss elite.

Another uniquely Swiss feature – the armed neutrality that acts as a guarantee of its autonomy and peace – becomes an essential part of the national identity, especially after two world wars. Ever since 1815, the year in which Europe’s great powers grant Switzerland neutrality, this small nation’s history has been one of success, preserving it during armed conflicts and enabling it to offer its “good offices” to belligerents and engage in a humanitarian mission. Although neutrality is periodically questioned in the context of foreign policy, for many Swiss it is part of the national identity.

For further information, contact

Tatiana Oberson, Head of Communications and Marketing
+41 (0)22 994 88 68 | tatiana.oberson@museenational.ch