

# Château de Prangins.

Château de Prangins. MUSÉE NATION  
NAL SUISSE. SCHWEIZERISCHES NA  
TIONALMUSEUM. MUSEO NAZIONA  
LE SVITZER. MUSEO NAZIONAL  
SVITZER



Une Suisse  
impliquée

# Colonialisme



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
Confederazione Svizzera  
Confederaziun svizra

Eidgenössisches Departement des Innern EDI  
Département fédéral de l'intérieur DFI  
Dipartimento federale dell'interno DFI

29.03.–11.10.2026

## Temporary exhibition

# Colonial. Switzerland's Global Entanglements

Château de Prangins | 29.3. – 11.10.2026

The exhibition consists of two parts: the first, larger section is divided into nine chapters exploring the links between Swiss individuals, companies and collectives and colonialism, while the second examines colonial continuities into the present day.

## Prologue

The exhibition prologue introduces the topic of European colonialism. In this opening section, two objects come face to face: a pith helmet, the typical uniform of the colonisers that served not only to protect them from the sun, wind and other dangers but also to mark them out from the local population; and a map of the world embroidered by the Filipino artist Cian Dayrit, who breaks with the customary conventions of Eurocentric cartography and questions the division of the world into a global North and South. Visitors will also be provided with a glossary explaining some of the terms used recurrently in the exhibition.

## Part One: Historical Overview

**Enslavement:** Each chapter is introduced by a representative object, in this case a section of a cotton plant. No raw material better illustrates the theme of slavery.

To exploit plantations in the colonies of the Caribbean, North and South America, European traders deported more than 12 million people from Africa between the 16th and 19th centuries. To this day, the transatlantic slave trade remains the largest mass deportation ever recorded, and it created the conditions under which racism could develop.

More than 250 Swiss companies and individuals were involved in trading and deporting some 172,000 people. Dehumanisation of the enslaved was an essential prerequisite for this form of exploitation.

**Trade:** The start of this chapter is illustrated by a cocoa pod, symbolising the trade in commodities. Cocoa was vital to the development of the Swiss chocolate industry.

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Swiss companies were involved in trading what were known as “colonial” goods: textiles, spices and tea from Asia; sugar, cocoa, coffee and then cotton from the Americas. European and Asian textiles were one of the main currencies of exchange in the transatlantic triangular trade.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Africa and South East Asia had been opened up as markets for European industrial products. In return, Europe imported raw materials to drive its own industrial production. In Switzerland, a nation poor in such resources, a few merchant

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companies rose to the ranks of global commodity traders. To this day, Geneva and Switzerland are among the global hubs of this kind of commerce.

**Mercenaries:** In the display case, a gun (naval blunderbuss) belonging to the Dutch East India Company reminds us of the violent past of Swiss mercenaries in the colonies.

By the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Swiss mercenaries were serving in the colonial armies of the European powers and taking part in campaigns of violent conquest as well as upholding the colonial order.

Unemployment and deprivation, along with models of masculinity that extolled the virtues of heroism and the pursuit of adventure, were among the primary factors driving recruitment into foreign armies. While mercenary activities were banned in 1859, it remained possible to serve abroad in colonial armies. Thousands of young Swiss joined the French Foreign Legion and the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army in colonial Asia and Africa.

**Settler colonies:** Beginning in 1600, colonial governments established colonies in which European settlers cultivated allegedly unoccupied land and engaged in trade. In truth, that land had been seized from the indigenous population.

The majority of Swiss emigrants came from modest backgrounds; because they were white, however, many of them profited over the long term from the established power structures and assisted in the forcible eviction of indigenous populations – particularly in North and South America but also in parts of Asia and Africa. To this day, the names of many towns recall the Swiss settler colonies, one example being New Bern in the United States.

**Missions:** From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Swiss missionaries were active in almost every part of the world, bringing the Christian faith to those who lived there. One of the first and largest Protestant missionary societies in Europe was the Basel Mission.

Missionaries – both men and women – built hospitals and schools, working with the local rulers. While they sometimes succeeded in effecting social change, they often held a paternalistic view of their relationships with the indigenous population. Returning to their home countries, they painted a picture of inferior cultures in the colonial territories.

**Career opportunities:** By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Swiss “experts” were working for the colonial powers: geologists searching for oil, engineers building bridges, and civil servants collecting taxes. Their skills were put to work developing and administering the colonies.

Swiss citizens were employed in countries such as the Congo Free State, where they assisted in the pillaging of the nation. In German South West Africa (present-day Namibia), the engineer Victor Solioz (1857–1921) built a railway line to transport minerals. Local opposition to this undertaking was suppressed by means of massacres that are today acknowledged as a genocide.

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**The colonial gaze:** Images of colonies and colonised peoples were disseminated in Switzerland through reports and photographs, often adopting a point of view that is now regarded as racist, stereotypical and exoticising. Even today, that “colonial gaze” remains firmly embedded in the Swiss collective memory.

This can be seen, for example, in the photographic portraits of the Swiss aviation pioneer Walter Mittelholzer (1894–1937). Between 1927 and 1934, he made a number of flights over the African continent and published a number of successful works.

**Exploiting nature:** European colonialism went hand in hand with a profound transformation and destruction of landscapes, flora and fauna. Its impact on the climate is still noticeable to this day.

Colonies served as seemingly inexhaustible reserves of natural resources. Demand grew strongly as Europe industrialised. Swiss men and women, too, were also guilty of exploiting nature through the intensive plantation economy or big game hunting, as seen in Sumatra and East Africa.

**Racism:** Until the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the supposed superiority of Christian culture was seen as an expression of the “divine order”. In the wake of the Enlightenment, however, this view came increasingly into question.

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, scientists in Europe formulated pseudo-scientific “racial theories” which no longer sought to justify the assumed superiority of the “white race” on the basis of religion, attributing it instead to “natural” factors including physical characteristics such as hair structure, the colour of the eyes or the shape of the skull. These “race theories” were a powerful tool in legitimising imperial rule and the exploitation of “foreign races” in the colonies.

Today, the idea of “human races” has been entirely refuted, notably thanks to genetic research.

## Part Two: Colonial Continuities

The bronze sculpture by the Genevan artist Mathias C. Pfund – an upturned miniature of the statue of David de Pury, a merchant from Neuchâtel who was involved in trading enslaved people in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – illustrates the current debate on the presence in public spaces of monuments to individuals linked to the colonial past. That issue is the thread running through the second part of the exhibition, which examines the consequences of colonialism right up to the modern era and the debates arising out of it, and asks what the colonial legacy means for modern-day Switzerland.

Colonial continuities are addressed with particular reference to South Africa. By means of illegal arms exports, secret nuclear agreements and large-scale banking transactions in gold, Switzerland supported and helped to prolong the apartheid regime, which ended in 1994.

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Other examples, such as the issue of restitution of works of art, illustrate the persistence of many dynamics inherited from colonialism. Economic inequalities remain between the erstwhile colonial powers and their former colonies, while racist representations and stereotypes directly inherited from colonialism continue to pervade societies.

This room suggests various ways of thinking about the persistence of the colonial past in Switzerland. An interactive video installation explores the traces of colonialism in everyday life, the debates on the colonial legacy in institutions and the public space, and issues of responsibility and reparations in today's Switzerland. Finally, visitors are invited to share their thoughts on the content presented and their impressions of the exhibition.

## Activities and events

The exhibition can also be explored through guided tours, a range of workshops and encounters with experts (in French only). Additionally, events, screenings and performances relating to the exhibition are offered in collaboration with the Usine à gaz Nyon, the far festival, the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne (MCBA), the Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne, the Festival cinémas d'Afrique Lausanne and Ethno-Doc. Full information can be found at [chateaudoprangins.ch](http://chateaudoprangins.ch)

Don't miss:

- (Post-)colonial Geneva, the ambivalences of a Swiss and international city, living library in association with the Maison de l'histoire (University of Geneva) – Sunday 10 May 2026
- Women and colonialism, guided tour by Denise Tonella, Director of the Swiss National Museum – Sunday 14 June 2026
- Cinéma Open Air in partnership with the Cinémathèque suisse – 20, 21 and 22 August 2026
- Switzerland's global entanglements, yesterday and today, living library bringing together artists and actors from civil society and associations, along with historians – Sunday 13 September 2026

## ESPECIALLY FOR FAMILIES

Tales and legends from Africa, presented in collaboration with Kanyana Mutombo of the Université Populaire Africaine en Suisse (UPAF)

## ESPECIALLY FOR SCHOOLS

- Teaching pack in collaboration with the Historical Dictionary of Switzerland (HDS)
- "It needs to be said", by Léonora Miano, dramatic reading in collaboration with the Usine à gaz Nyon
- Interactive workshops to raise awareness of prejudice, discrimination and racism (UPAF)
- Teaching workshops based around the film "Je suis Noires" with co-director Rachel M'Bon (NWAR association) and LICRA Geneva

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- Guided tours on request with trained cultural mediators in collaboration with the think tank UPYA