

The Swiss National Museum : relating and explaining the construct of Switzerland

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Relating and explaining the construct of Switzerland

The Swiss National Museum hit the headlines last spring when its long-standing director, Andres Furger, was forced out of his job following disagreement with the Federal Office for Culture over the Musée Suisse group. Andreas Spillmann, who has been appointed as Furger's interim replacement, talks to "Swiss Review" about the work of the National Museum.



ANDREAS SPILLMANN

Forty-six-year-old Andreas Spillmann first trained as an actor at Otto Falckenberg Schule in Munich before studying and graduating in economics in Zurich. After a spell as a freelance consultant, Spillmann was appointed

the city of Basel's cultural representative. In 2002, he became first the commercial and later also the artistic director of the Zurich Schauspielhaus theatre. He has been the interim director of the Musée Suisse group since the summer of 2006.

SWISS REVIEW: The National Museum in Zurich is bursting at the seams. How far advanced are the expansion plans?

ANDREAS SPILLMANN: Basel-based architects Christ & Gantenbein will be ready to present the final construction project including the building costs to the construction commission in the spring. We're making good headway. The construction bill will be tabled in parliament in 2008, as planned.

Every canton has its own historical museum, so do many local authorities. Do we really need a national museum?

Absolutely. Since the Swiss National Museum was founded, most cities have entrusted their cultural history exhibits to us. Incidentally, few cities can afford a large historical museum.

In what way are the cantonal museums in Geneva, Berne and Basel different to a national museum?

As early as the 19th Century, cross-border trading in art prompted the justified concern that Switzerland was in danger of losing the most valuable items of its cultural history. This led to the foundation of the National Museum, which was commissioned to collect, preserve and exhibit Swiss cultural assets. Of course the municipal museums have a similar remit, albeit restricted to their city's history.

Does the National Museum collaborate with the cantonal history museums? Are attempts made to avoid duplication?

Yes to both questions. We work together by discussing our collection policies and lending each other exhibits. On the other hand, this isn't always successful, which sometimes leads to duplication.

Does the National Museum also need to act as a centre of excellence for other museums; a benchmark for collecting, preserving and exhibiting national treasures?

Yes. Thanks to the National Museum's new collection centre in Affoltern, we will be able to support cantonal, municipal

and private museums even better than before.

What with?

With our preservation research, with preventative preservation techniques and by lending out our exhibits.

The National Museum already has more than a million different objects. Where do they come from, and how many are added every year?

We get about a thousand new objects a year, either as gifts or purchased by us.

What role does coincidence play in collecting? And what criteria are used to decide what future generations will be interested in seeing?

Of course we collect systematically and define so-called "threshold" objects that are based on a new technology or design, for example. But coincidence always plays a big part. It is both friend and foe.

How old are the youngest objects that the National Museum collects?

Not very old. Indeed very contemporary. For instance new textiles, household equipment and securities or bank notes that are still in circulation. Numismatists don't only collect pretty coins.

Should everyday items like household or sports goods find their way into a national museum?

Of course. Our visitors would love to see "everyday" things from the Reformation, the Renaissance and the Middle Ages too. Unfortunately, we can't offer that anymore. Back then, "everyday" items weren't yet seen as being of cultural historical value.

The Federal Office for Culture promotes a national museum policy for its historic collections. What are the guidelines for this, and what objectives are they designed to meet?

It's less a case of guidelines than a joint search for coherent solutions to the country's aforementioned collection policy, as well as about the question of whether there is any point in maintaining a 19th-Century organisational form, and what tasks the state should assign its federal museums. Rather than generating official guidelines per se, such deliberations are intended wherever possible to formulate coherent federal cultural policies for the future.

Some people expect the National Museum to promote our national identity. How can a museum meet this demand?

"Promoting" the identity of Switzerland is, I think, a very challenging demand, perhaps too great a task.

I mean, the National Museum is supposed to tell the nation's story. But which story should it tell?

Among other things, stories that describe and explain the "construct of Switzerland" rather than rushing into deconstruction: stories about the high-quality production of luxury goods, stories about immigrants like Nietzsche and Wagner, stories about civil liberty and direct democracy in a monarchic environment, stories about thrift and armed neutrality during the Thirty Years' War.

Many people consider the National Museum archaic. Is this a fair impression? How have visitor numbers developed in recent years?

Historical museums – even those with high visitor numbers – can quickly develop a certain antiquated air. The Swiss National Museum is no exception. That means we have to work even harder to constantly breathe new life into our permanent exhibition and ensure we choose topical issues and approaches for our special exhibitions.

How interested are young people in the National Museum? Does this extend beyond the obligatory?

We probably have a somewhat easier task than art museums, for example, as regards young people. In their eyes, history is about telling stories. We therefore want to refurbish the west tower this winter, putting in the National Museum's weapons and armour collection, which younger audiences sorely miss.

INTERVIEW BY HEINZ ECKERT

THE SWISS NATIONAL MUSEUM

The Swiss National Museum in Zurich brings together eight Swiss cultural history museums spread right across the country.

The Musée Suisse group has the largest and most important collection of items of cultural history in Switzerland. It comprises about a million objects of national significance from various periods, from ancient and early history to the 21st Century. In addition to collecting, preserving and exhibiting important objects, the National Museum's cultural remit includes conducting general research and providing information about Swiss art and cultural history. With its storage facility and specialist and photographic libraries, the Swiss National Museum has positioned itself as a specialist institution.



Wildegg Castle



Swiss National Museum, Zurich



Château de Prangins

The eight museums of the Musée Suisse group are a national and international window on the culture and history of life in Switzerland. As museums for cultural history, their permanent and temporary exhibitions and special events address trends and developments in what is now Switzerland, from ancient and early history to the present day. In so doing, they are bound by a broad understanding of culture that blends history, applied and fine arts as well as historical lifestyles into an overview of cultural history.

The following eight institutions belong to the Musée Suisse group:

- Swiss National Museum, Zurich
- Musée National Suisse, Chateau de Prangins
- Schlossdomäne Wildegg AG

- Forum of Swiss History, Schwyz
- Museum of Musical Automaton, Seewen
- Bäregasse Museum, Zurich
- Zur Meisen Guild House, Zurich
- Swiss Customs Museum, Cantine di Gandria (TI)

The Swiss Confederation not only supports the eight institutions that make up the Musée Suisse group, but owns a total of 15 museums itself. The state also supports another 70 museums, for which no fewer than five departments and eleven federal offices are responsible. Because there is strictly speaking no museum policy, parliament has commissioned the Federal Council to draw up a binding strategy by 2007.



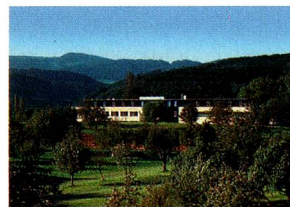
Bäregasse Museum, Zurich



Forum of Swiss History, Schwyz



Customs Museum, Gandria



Museum of Musical Automaton, Seewen



"Zur Meisen" Guild House, Zurich