

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 85 (2019)
Heft: [4]

Artikel: Square, but not proportional
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943862>

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Artist John Webber – First Swiss to New Zealand



Artist John Webber

The first Swiss known to have set foot in New Zealand was the artist John Webber. Webber was born in London in 1751, the second child of Mary and Abraham Webber. His father, a sculptor from Bern, anglicised his surname of Wäber to Webber when he moved to England to live. When John was six, his parents sent him to Bern to live with his Aunt. He must have shown ability in art, for at sixteen he was apprenticed to a leading, and popular, landscape artist in Switzerland, Johann Aberli. He spent three years in Aberli's studio, and then had four years in Paris, where he studied drawing and oil painting at the Académie Royale. Eventually he returned to London to work and to continue his studies at the Royal Academy there.



John Webber's Captain Cook, oil on canvas, 1776 (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)

In 1776, Webber's work at an exhibition caught the eye of Daniel Solander, a botanist on Cook's first voyage. Solander, knowing that the Admiralty was looking for a suitable expedition artist, recommended him for the job. So, at the age of 24 he accompanied Captain Cook on his third voyage in 1777 which included New Zealand.

Webber was popular with his shipmates, and his work was appreciated too. He penned, crayoned, and water-coloured his way around the world, producing a large volume of material.

One of his first tasks on the expedition's return to England in 1780 was to complete the portrait of James Cook he had begun in 1776, which he then presented to Cook's widow.

The Admiralty employed him for several years making oil paintings based on his drawings. These were the illustrations for the official account of the voyage. He then supervised the engravings made of the pictures to enable them to be printed and published.

Webber's reputation as an artist was thoroughly established by his work from this voyage. For the rest of his life he made regular tours drawing landscapes in Britain and Europe. He continued to do portraits and paint compositions based on the drawings of his Pacific travels, such as his painting of Ship Cove.

He was one of the first artists to make and sell prints of his own works. He was made a full member of the Royal Academy in 1791 - a distinction in those days for someone who was regarded primarily as a landscape artist. He died from kidney disease in 1793, leaving 'a considerable fortune'.

Text originally published in Tai Awatea, Te Papa's on floor multimedia database (1998)
<https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/topic/573>



Square, but not proportional



"The Swiss cross is a white, upright, free-standing cross depicted against a red background, whose arms, which are all of equal size, are one-sixth longer than they are wide." This is how the Swiss Federal Assembly defined the dimensions of the Swiss coat of arms on 12 December 1889.

The arms of the Swiss Cross are therefore not square. The flag itself, however, most definitely is – unlike most other national flags. It had already been handled as such, but the new Coat of Arms Protection Act made the square shape mandatory on 1 January 2017.

The Swiss foundation Pro Patria has made the special dimensions and colour of our flag the motif of its stamps for 2019. Under the guiding principle of "Using heritage to shape the future", it raises funds to preserve Switzerland's cultural heritage through stamps with surcharges. Bernese designer Max Henschel has focused on the proportions of the cross and the flag in the hand-drawn CHF 1+CHF 0.50 stamp, which symbolizes heritage.

By contract, the colour red takes center stage in the computer-generated CHF 0.85+CHF 0.40 stamp, which represents the future and features a background made up of different definitions of red, such as "CMYK 0 / 100 / 100 / 0", "Pantone 485 C / 485 U" and "RAL 3020 Traffic red".

https://www.magazine-focus-on-stamps.ch/Jürg_Freudiger