

Cultural life in Switzerland

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CULTURAL LIFE IN SWITZERLAND.

By Dr. F. Huber-Renfer.

"The Monastery and the Collegiate Church of St. Gall."

There, where to-day a perfect sea of houses extends over the busy industrial city of St. Gall, in the Eastern part of Switzerland, there stood, more than thirteen centuries ago, a virgin forest that spread from the Lake of Constance, right to the Säntis. It was this very solitude of that region which led the Irish monk, Gall, to build an oratory here, a house of prayer, which became the nucleus of the famous monastery of St. Gall, which developed rapidly and soon became renowned throughout the whole of the Occident. It was from here that the monks proceeded to convert to Christianity the inhabitants of the present day East Switzerland, which, at the beginning of the eighth century is said to have been completely Christianized. After the monastery had been attacked and plundered on several occasions, it proved possible for the Abbot Otmar to once more bring back to life, this small city of God. He introduced the Rule of St. Benedict, and thus laid down the foundation for the magnificent period of prosperity enjoyed by the monastery in the ninth century. Rich gifts and a prudent and economic administration of the property produced the necessary means for the building of a new conventual Church. This Church was consecrated in the year 835, and in time to come St. Gall became that centre of culture to which such poets and musicians among its monks as Iso, Ratpert, Tutilo, Notker the Stammerer, and others, were to add the lustre of their talents. In their writing-rooms, the scrivener-monks produced richly illuminated manuscripts, many of which we can still admire as being perfect works of art.

The unique collection of art treasures which had been gathered together in the Minster, throughout the centuries, were all destroyed in the iconoclastic riots which occurred at the time of the Reformation. The ancient chronicles report that forty-six waggons were required to take the ruined art treasures to the place where they were burnt. However, the Monastery recovered from this blow, also. Fresh contingents of monks arrived, and after the Anti-Reformation period, these monks enjoyed such an excellent reputation that they were called to other religious houses in order to rehabilitate them and to bring a new and better spirit to them. This brings us to the last most brilliant period in the history of the monastery, which is associated inseparably with the two Prince Abbots Celestin II and Beda Angehrn. Both of them, erected an imperishable monument to themselves in the building of a new Collegiate Church. It is true that the ancient venerable buildings had to make place for it, and only the Western, i.e. the Otmar Crypt, dating from 867, has been preserved. But, in their stead there arose a truly worthy substitute, namely, the present Collegiate Church of St. Gall. This was built in 1750, and is the work, achieved in common, of the most important architects and artists of that time. The Master Builders were Peter Thumb and his son, from Constance, by the lake of the same name, whilst the internal decorations were carried out by distinguished artists who gave of their very best to this task. The artist Wenzinger was responsible for

the frescoes in the cupola, as well as for the wonderful reliefs, whilst another artist, named Feichtmayer, produced the richly carved choir-stalls and the sixteen confessionals, as also the relief representing the crowning of the Blessed Virgin, which is to be found on the façade of the tower. The brothers Gigl carried out the fine Rococo stucco-work in the choir, whilst Wannenmacher was the artist who made the frescoes in the choir, which, unfortunately, were very soon damaged. The beautiful choir-grille was designed by Anton Dür — in short, there came into being a work of art possessing a unity and harmony of expression, such as is rarely to be found.

The building which showed signs of considerable decay, after only two hundred years, has been renovated with great care in the course of the past decades, enormous sums having to be spent for this purpose. To-day, the Collegiate Church of St. Gall stands before us, once more, in all its splendour and no one who views it can miss the enchantment of its beauty.

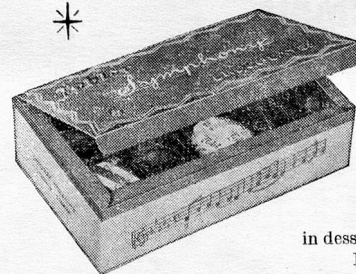
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