

# Swiss humorous drawings

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# Features

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Compatriots who would like to read the

### New Year's

Message delivered by the President of the Swiss Confederation may apply to Embassies or Consulates.

## Swiss humorous drawings

Perhaps this heading already may cause a smile with some readers abroad, for they cannot imagine that the Swiss who have the reputation of being serious, calm and reasonable, should also have some humour or even know how to appreciate it. And yet, there is a Swiss brand of humour which – if expressed in drawings – has the advantage of being international, national and regional all at the same time, and this thanks to the various cultures and languages anchored in our country.

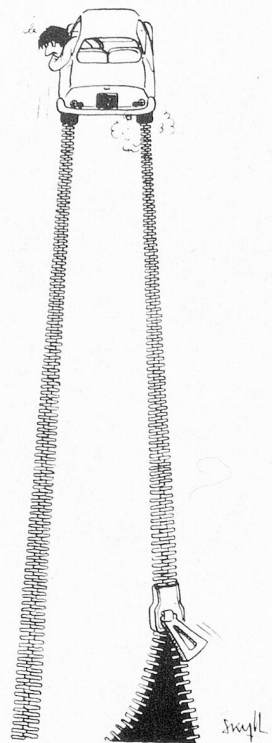
At exhibitions every year where the best artists of all continents are represented, the specialists in pictorial humour are agreed that entries from Switzerland show very personal characteristics. Not only are they of high artistic value, but they contain freshness of ideas full of originality and imagination. The numerous prizes and awards which Swiss humorists receive, testify to this.

Prof. Gianeri, famous Italian critic of humorous art, describes Swiss humorous drawings as follows: «...if, as Arsène Alexandre maintains, caricature is a mischievous, malicious animal with a thick skin and double tongue, then Swiss caricature is an animal with three tongues. It is indeed the only one which, with the ease of a computer, speaks three different languages in a drawing. It is a caricature whose roots go very deep, and with an authentic pedigree...»

### The creators of Swiss humour

This definition is flattering, yet correct; for it suffices to confirm that several Swiss drawing artists belong to the pioneers in the world history of humour. Some of them indeed became very famous abroad. Thus we owe the first real book of caricatures with the title «Hollandia Regenerata» (1798) to

David Hess (1770–1843), a book which is practically no longer to be found and which contains grim drawings devoted to the lost cause of the French counter-revolutionary reaction. But it was the Brothers Usteri (Johann Martin 1763–1827 and Paul 1770–1843) who stimulated the distribution of popular humorous drawings by their works published in German-Swiss calendars. Martin Disteli (1802–1844), unequalled creator of satirical animal caricatures, and



Drawing SKYLL.

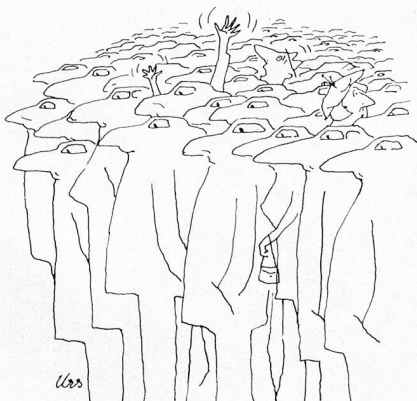
Hieronimus Hess (1799–1850) were very famous. And who does not know the works by Rodolphe Toepffer (1799–1846) whom one considers the creator of the strip cartoon. His pictorial sequences, true comedies in drawings («Vieux-Bois», «Crépin», «Jabot», «Dr. Festus» etc.), which were highly valued at the time by Goethe and Xavier de Maistre, are equally successful today. Theophile Steinlen

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(1859–1923) gained an excellent reputation with his drawings which represented the Paris popular spirit so strikingly. Without being able to mention all the names, we must mention artists like Travies, Varé, Carlège, Loutan, Minouvis, Viollier, who all helped to create a «Swiss humour» with their art and spirit, a humour which has remained valid throughout the years. And to end this short summary of forerunners of Swiss humour, we must remember some of our great painters (Ferdinand Hodler, Félix Vallotton, Paul Klee, Edmond Bille) who produced excellent caricatures and satirical sketches.

## Expansion and difficulties

During the last century, a new press branch began to establish itself: the humorous and satirical press. It allowed draughtsmen to expand and to get known. But that branch of the press which often showed political tendencies, has some difficulties in surviving. The life of most of these publications was of short duration, and that is the reason why collectors passionately hunt for these witnesses of the past today. The first satirical periodical, the «Guckkasten», was produced in Berne in 1840, followed in Solothurn by the «Postheiri» in the year 1844. In the French-speaking part of Switzerland, «Le Carillon de Saint-Gervais» was founded in Geneva in

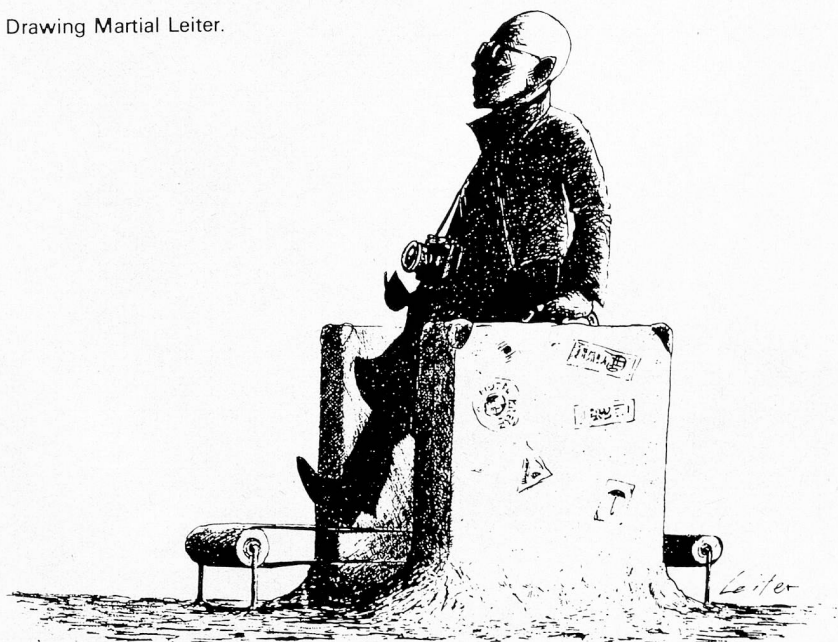


Drawing Peter Hurzeler.

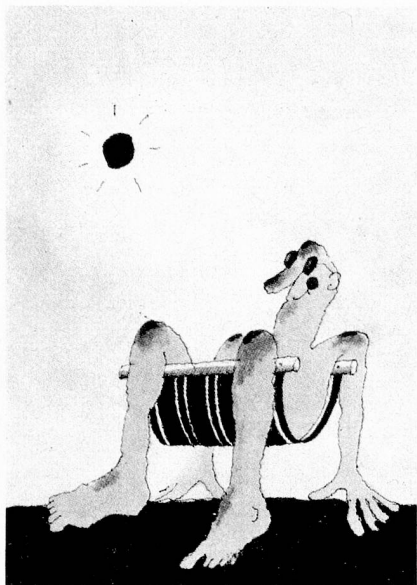
1850, and a year later two new publications originated: «La Guêpe» (the wasp) in Lausanne, and «Le Figaro Suisse» in Neuchâtel. Exactly one hundred years ago, in 1875, the first number of the «Nebelspalter» appeared, now so famous, a weekly publication which counts as one of the most important humorous magazines of the world today. The «Nebelspalter»

reflects the frame of mind of the average Swiss, political events and daily life, without, however, neglecting the imagination and the purely humorous drawing. Later, periodicals like «Guguss» (1879) and «L'Arbalète» (the crossbow) appeared, but their existence, too, was of short duration. It is regrettable that this kind of press has practically disappear-

Drawing Martial Leiter.



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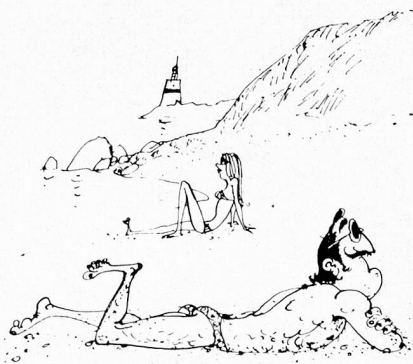
Drawing René Fehr.

ed in Switzerland; brave efforts such as «Le Bonjour de Jack Rollan», «La Pomme» and others would have needed more assistance in order to survive. The humorous drawing and the caricature have since had an (often much too small) refuge only in the so-called «normal» press, and, let us mention that as well, in publicity and in odd papers appearing on occasions like the carnival.

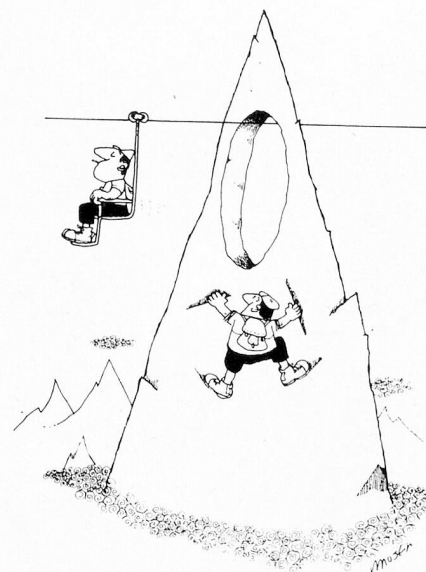
## One humour that is smiling to the future

Concerning the contemporary humorous drawing, it is no doubt

Drawing André Paul.



worthy of its above-mentioned predecessors: it is the logical continuation. It has some of the most modern graphic forms, often revolutionary and unexpected, much variety of ideas, subjects and of composition. This is no longer always the case in some other countries, where humour (or at least its presentation) has been going through a rather slow or even stationary process, where artists often follow tendencies of fashion far too much, tendencies dictated by the editors of publications: we need the drawings which the public demand! That is «consumer humour». In Switzerland, the situation is different. As the humorous artist is strictly limited in his publications, he has the chance of giving the best only of his output, of cultivating his works and not falling into the trap of laziness. It allows him to stand at the top of the development of drawn humour, so to speak. Artists like Barberis, Bö, Gilsi, Sul, Stieger, Lindi, Moser, Steger, the two Siggs (Fredy and Hans), Büchi, Jüsp, have been (and still are) revivers of humour and modern caricature in the German-speaking part of Switzerland: succession is secured in outstanding manner, dynamic and intelligent, safeguarded by names like Fehr, Furrer, Gloor, Bächli, Hürzeler, Wyss,



Drawing Hans Moser.

Eickert, Scapa, von Tommei. Even if this movement has not taken place in such an unbroken way in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, possibly because the artists are greater individualists, papers do publish lively and stylistically very varied works by established humorous artists and caricaturists like Urs, André Paul, Leffel, Reymond, Merminod, Meyer. The new promising generation with Skyll, Leiter, Richard, Gos, von Balmoos, indicates a

Drawing Jürg Furrer.



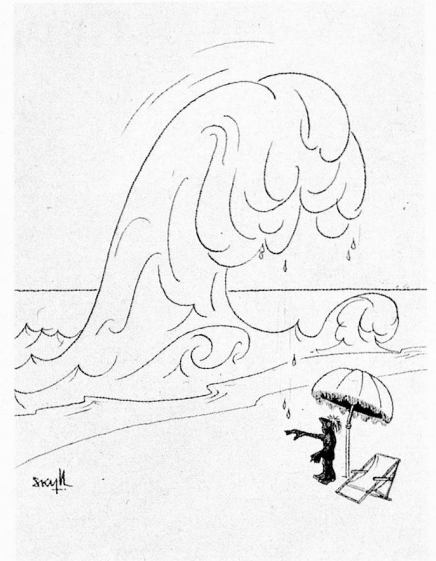
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Jean-Pierre Moulin's famous «Humour des Suisses» (humour of the Swiss) is being published in a well-revised edition by the Paris publishers Jean-Claude Lattès. It appeared for the first time 10 years ago.

Author's comment to this new edition:

«Do we still have reason to smile in 1976? Has the good-natured Swiss humour of the sixties resisted pollution, recession, its originators, pesticides and futurologists?»

According to our enquiries, the present tornado fortunately has not (not yet...) swept away the humour of the Swiss. That is the reason why we have decided to present this particular choice once more, supplemented by some good stories which have in the meantime arisen from the inexhaustible spring in which the humorous chronicles of a country renew themselves.»



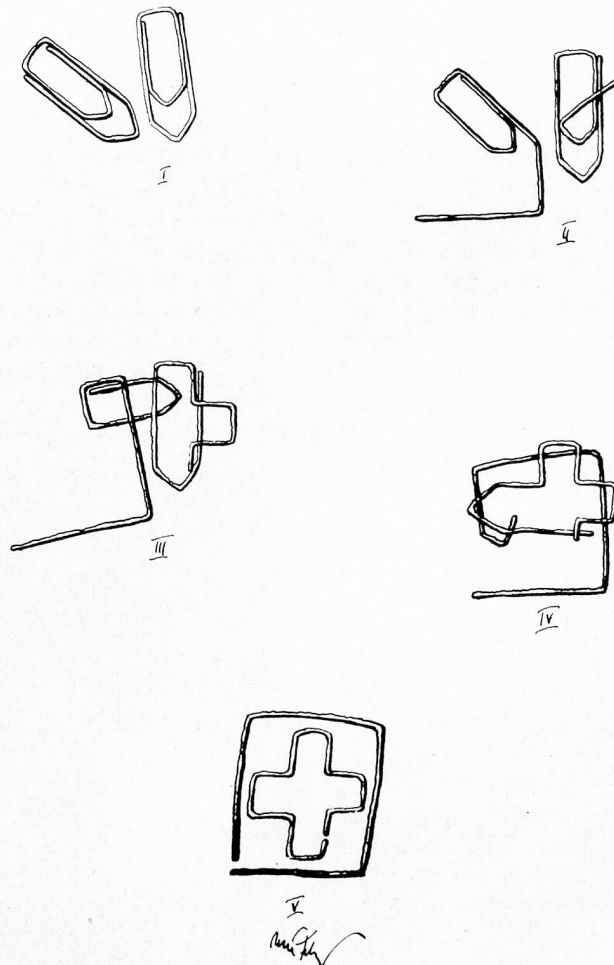
Drawing SKYLL.

humorous future rich in original creations. In the Ticino, too, one knows how to get people to grin thanks to the crayon of a Piatti (resident in Basle), a Crivelli, Cavanani, Grossi, Guglielmetti. That canton has produced the probably best-known Swiss draughtsman abroad, Giovanetti (creator of Max, the little bear) who made his career in the United States. He is not the only artist, ambassador of Swiss humorous drawing, who went to live abroad: Haëm, Pélotsch, Barth, Devrient, Philippe, they have all made a name for themselves outside our frontiers. But one can't forget their Swiss origin when one looks at their humorous creations which are published regularly in their country of origin.

For the first time, an exhibition has been shown in Vasto, Milan and Paris, showing the works of the «22 Swiss Humorists» on the subject of holidays. The success of this panorama of helvetic wit has proved beyond any doubt that Tell's sons have humour, sound humour... and what's more of «Swiss quality».

Jean-François Burgener

*The illustrations to this article come from the exhibition «22 Swiss Humorists».*



Drawing René Fehr, Nebelspalter.