



Switzerland's cultural strengths

1. Swiss self-determination

Switzerland is situated at the heart of Europe. North and south have come together in the Alpine habitat for ages, at the crossroads of seven nations, eight languages, countless dialects and a thousand valleys. Surely no other natural landscape in Europe has so lastingly formed its local inhabitants as well as its foreign visitors as have the Alps, for mountainous regions in general tend to be central to their inhabitants' identity. As early as the Renaissance, the Swiss nation was symbolically linked with the Alpine region.

A Swiss model of self-determination and liberty developed, as exemplified by the mountain-dwellers and in contrast to the social order under the monarchies predominant in much of the rest of Europe.

In the 18th century such conceptions gained a new hold on the popular imagination as they became explicitly associated with a model landscape: the only real Swiss, in other words, was a mountain-dweller. During the 19th century, as the great nation-states were formed around it, Switzerland earned its reputation as the motherland of Europe's rivers and the guardian of its mountain passes¹ (see the chapter on "The Country and its people").

Thanks to the pass roads that look as if they were designed to form a Swiss cross, there have been lively cultural exchanges since the Roman period. And in the fight for control of these pass routes, Switzerland was for centuries involved in military disputes until by a fortune stroke of fate Switzerland developed into a place of asylum for political refugees. The artistic map of mediaeval Europe already accorded the Alps particular significance, in part because of the many cloisters nestled among them, such as those at Disentis, Einsiedeln, Engelberg and St. Gallen, all centres of creative production, as well as for the fact that a wide range of aesthetic traditions met and mingled within their precincts. Forming the passage between Italy and Western and Central Europe, finally, the Alpine region was for many centuries not only of great strategic and political importance but also played a key artistic role. It was among the major sites of the Reformation, with Zwingli and Calvin spreading the Protestant message across the entire world from Zurich and Geneva, respectively.

The Alps have always provided more of an inspiration to artists than a hindrance, after all. Switzerland has always been a popular destination for travellers, as well as time and again providing a haven for artists, intellectuals, philosophers and free-thinkers, such as the anarchists of the late 19th century or those displaced by the World Wars. All found in Switzerland a place of refuge and an environment in which they could continue to work and remain artistically and intellectually active. It was thus that our country and its Alpine habitat found their way into story and song, as well as into a host of visual representations.

¹ François Walter, "Alpen", ch. 5, "Wahrnehmung und Ideologie", *Historical Dictionary of Switzerland (HDS)*, version dated 21.12.2006.

During his period of exile in Switzerland, Richard Wagner developed a democratic philosophy of music, formulated his theoretical views on the opera and decisively influenced Swiss musical life. Igor Stravinsky was inspired to devise a new form of opera, of which his "Histoire du Soldat" is the prime example. Ferruccio Busoni, himself a child of two cultures, made a lasting impact as a pianist, composer and theoretician. Wladimir Vogel developed his own form of dodecaphony. From Paderewski to Veress, Bartok and Martinu, numerous other composers have taken refuge in Switzerland, Bartok and Martinu thanks to Paul Sacher, who encouraged them to compose a number of major works. The Zurich City Theatre staged the premieres of works by Hindemith, Berg and Schoenberg.

Artists turned Zurich into a theatrical centre during the first half of the 20th century. The Dada movement, founded in Zurich by the Germans Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, the Alsatian Hans Arp, the Rumanien Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco and active until 1919, added life to the local cultural scene during the epoch of the First World War, while Switzerland offered a kind of asylum to members of the avant-garde in the Second World War. The Schauspielhaus Zürich hosted the debut performances of Brecht, Ödön von Horvath and Else Lasker-Schüler. The list of illustrious personages who have made art in Switzerland, whether only briefly or for a more sustained period, is thus a long one, from Goethe and Schiller to Hans Arp, Thomas and Erika Mann, Ernest Hemingway, Hermann Hesse, Elias Canetti, James Joyce, Niki de Saint Phalle, Barbara Hendricks and Gianni Motti.

Indigenous traditions enjoyed an exceptionally long life in the Alpine region. In addition, the difficulty of life there tended to encourage emigration, and the artists and craftspeople who left their native habitat were able to rise to prominence quickly thanks to their perseverance, their curiosity and the quiet superiority of their work. Once established, the fame of such pillars of their new cultural communities reached back to their homeland. Some of them, such as Domenico Fontana, Carlo Maderno and Francesco Borromini of Ticino, enjoyed Europe-wide renown as they served Rome throughout an entire century with their skills in the building trade.² Into the 20th century, artists were still frequently choosing to leave Switzerland, if for the most part only temporarily. Le Corbusier, Alberto Giacometti, Meret Oppenheim, Jean Dubuffet and Jean Tinguely, to name only a few of these voluntary exiles, all worked at different times in Paris and were celebrated as the artistic lodestars of their era. For their part, Paul Klee and Johannes Itten were major contributors to the rise of Bauhaus in Germany. Switzerland's contemporary artists, such as Fischli / Weiss, Pipilotti Rist, Roman Signer and Thomas Hirschhorn, are citizens of the world, at home both in Switzerland and abroad. What unites them as Swiss, however, is an approach to the image and identity of their native land's striking natural and cultural phenomena that is frequently playful. Swiss artists produce vivid work; the video and new media art scene is fresh and lively, featuring such participants as Etoy, a "corporation" registered in Zug whose spectacular stunts continuously test the boundaries between art, identity, politics, technology, power, music and business. Conceptual art, on the other hand, is not much favoured.

2. Feats of architectural design and civil engineering in response to a challenging landscape

The Alps have of course also aroused the curiosity of natural scientists, whose research into the region helped to initiate a process of demystification. With more and more scholars succumbing to the

² "Alpen", ch. 4, "Kulturgeschichte", *Historical Dictionary of Switzerland (HDS)*, version dated 21.12.2006.

allure of mountaineering and beginning to scale even the highest peaks, the Alps were definitively claimed in the name of science in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries as the first daring triumphs of high-altitude engineering were celebrated: the roads through mountain passes, the power plants and dams, the Swiss Federal Railways and the motorways, all culminating in the present century with the new transalpine railway project known as NEAT.

The prototype for such derring-do was provided by Guillaume-Henri Dufour, Switzerland's first general, who had been trained as a polyvalent engineer in Paris and who built the world's first wire-cable suspension bridge in Geneva in 1823. Maurice Köchlin, another Swiss, helped with the construction of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, while his compatriot, the civil engineer Robert Maillart, established the standards for bridge-building in the first half of the 20th century.

As for Swiss architecture, it made significant contributions to the international modernist debate in the person of Le Corbusier (1887-1965), whose work in Paris made him one of the 20th century's leading theorists and practitioners of his craft.

To this day, the effect of the constructive approach of engineers and master builders is evident in Swiss architecture, which manages to combine sensuousness with a basic reservation and minimalism, and thus pay tribute to the defiant, intimidating presence of the surrounding landscape. Architects in Switzerland, after all, are never short of settings filled with natural drama: and given that their constructions are constantly having to square up to the massive peaks beyond them, it is hardly surprising that the treatment of the landscape, its use and abuse, has provoked lively debate.

The last three decades have seen a considerable number of Swiss architects achieve international renown, all graduates of one or another of the country's three universities with architecture departments (the EPFL, the ETH or the recently founded Università della Svizzera italiana). Tendenza of Ticino was celebrated in the 1980s for its precise formal qualities and craftsmanship, while the sobre minimalism of the German-speaking and French-speaking schools won respect in the 1990s. Among Switzerland's top international stars are Mario Botta of Ticino and Herzog & de Meuron of Basel, all famed for their sensuous constructions.

Today, particularly in the cantons of Ticino, Basel, Graubünden, Lucerne, Zurich and Bern, Switzerland is a breeding ground for quietly superior architecture. Helvetian diversity encompasses historical churches, castles and old towns as well as modern buildings by such giants of contemporary architecture as Mario Botta, Roger Diener, Annette Gigon and Mike Guyer, Herzog & de Meuron, Peter Zumthor and Gion Antoni Caminada. Mario Botta's style is on view, among other places, in the Centre Dürrenmatt near Neuchâtel, which houses the literary estate of the renowned Swiss author and painter and serves as a venue for literary and artistic events.

Swiss cities are enriched as well by museums designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano, hotels and concert halls by Jean Nouvel of France, and factories by the American architects Frank Gehry and Richard Meier.³

3. Switzerland's future security

More than most other countries, Switzerland stands for stability. The basis for this is Switzerland's political and economic system which is based on balance and has developed over the years (see

³ swissworld.org

strength profile "the country and its people"). Stability and steadiness create a high level of predictability and trustworthiness in Switzerland and in dealings with Switzerland. This creates a high level of future security both for society and for individuals.

In the cultural sphere, future security means stable framework conditions for culture and for cultural workers. Switzerland has one of the most extensive and sophisticated systems of culture promotion in the world. Art and artists benefit from numerous state and private institutions for the promotion of culture. As there is no clear-cut legal basis for culture promotion, this remains an interaction between public and private financing. Another contributory factor is the competition between the cantons and the federation, which has produced an incredible diversity of art locations.⁴

The density of art locations in Switzerland is unique by international standards. With 930 museums, one per 7,500 inhabitants, Switzerland has one of the highest museum densities in the world. The number of museums has more than tripled since 1950, the majority of the new foundations being regional museums. In 1999, about ten million museum visits per year. The Swiss visit museums on an average once per month – four times more frequently than the French.⁵

These museums include exclusive locations such as the Musée Rath in Geneva, successful exhibition centres such as the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, the Fondation Gianadda in Martigny, the Paul Klee Centre in Bern and the Museum Rietberg in Zurich. In addition there is a wide range of quality small museums such as the Museum zu Allerheiligen in Schaffhausen or Schloss Hünegg near Lake Thun.

On top of this, Swiss association activity – a Helvetian peculiarity and a further example of the strong role that culture plays in everyday life – has led to the establishment of an amazing number of local museums covering a wide range of subjects, e.g. the Museum in the Gonzen Mine near Sargans, the Musée international d'horlogerie in La Chaux-de-Fonds and the Winter Sportmuseum in Davos.

What is true for museums also applies to art museums and art exhibition centres, art collections and galleries. The prominent role that was and still is played by private collectors is noteworthy, whether as founders of major private art collections or as the driving forces behind private exhibition spaces. Famous examples are the Oskar Reinhardt collection in Winterthur, the Kirchner Museum in Davos, the Hauser & Wirth collection in St. Gallen, the Collection de l'Art brut in Lausanne, the Fondation Beyeler and the exhibition in Basel which is based on the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation.

Museums are especially appreciated in Switzerland, whose 930 institutions (one museum for every 7,500 inhabitants) make it one of the most densely served in the world. Since 1950 the number of museums has more than tripled, with their ranks being swelled mainly by regional institutions. In 1999 some 10 million museum visitors were registered; at the average rate of one visit per month, the Swiss go four times more frequently to their museums than do the French.⁶

The range of offerings includes exquisite institutions like the Musée Rath in Geneva and successful exhibition venues such as the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, the Fondation Gianadda in Martigny, the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern and the Museum Rietberg in Zurich. These are supplemented by a host of

⁴ Omlin, Sibylle (2002): *Kunst aus der Schweiz. Kunstschaffen und Kunstsystem im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Zürich: Pro Helvetia.

⁵ Mottaz Baran, Arlette (2006): *Publikum und Museen in der Schweiz: Emblematische Vorstellungen und soziales Ritual*, Bern: Lang.

⁶ Arlette Mottaz Baran (2006), *Publikum und Museen in der Schweiz: Emblematische Vorstellungen und soziales Ritual*, Bern: Lang.

smaller, bijou houses, including the Museum zu Allerheiligen in Schaffhausen and Schloss Hünegg on the Lake of Thun.

In addition, the peculiarly Helvetian tradition of organising its leisure activities into clubs or associations provides further evidence of the cultural colonisation of Swiss everyday life and has brought forth a wealth of local museums with a broad range of specialities, such as the Gonzen mining museum near Sargans, the Musée international d'horlogerie in La Chaux-de-Fonds, and Davos's museum of winter sports.

On international comparison, Switzerland is uniquely blessed with artistic locales. What may be said of museums in general is also true of halls and museums of fine art, of art collections and galleries. The central role played in Swiss artistic life both past and present by private collectors is remarkable, whether they have served as the founders of notable private collections or lent their weight to the creation of private exhibition spaces. Worthy of mention among such institutions are the Oskar Reinhardt Collection in Winterthur, the Kirchner Museum in Davos, St. Gallen's Hauser & Wirth Collection, the Collection de l'Art brut in Lausanne and Basel's Fondation Beyeler and Schaulager, this last based on the collection of the Emanuel Hoffmann-Stiftung.

Switzerland boasts one of the world's most highly developed systems of cultural sponsorship. Art and its creators both profit from a host of state and private funding institutions, in a country in which the continuing absence of specific legislation has made of cultural sponsorship an open field for both the public and private sectors. Added to this is the competitiveness built into the federalist system, which has elicited an incredible variety of sites of artistic production.⁷

With its wealth of artistic locales, its flare for quality and its well-connected, cosmopolitan citizenry, Switzerland is also an international hub of the art trade. The country is currently home to the fourth largest art market in the world, with Zurich surpassed only by London as Europe's sales leader. Art Basel, founded in 1970 and already rich in tradition, and its younger counterpart, Art Basel Miami Beach, are the world's top centres for the trade in modern and contemporary artworks. The best galleries from across the globe send their representatives to these two fairs, making them a veritable Mecca for collectors, curators and artists.

Once again, the reasons for these successes may be found in Switzerland's familiar key elements: its place at the heart of Europe, its stability, the restraint exercised by its government (which does not impose taxes on art), and the curiosity and freshness of its inhabitants. For the Swiss are enthusiastic art collectors with a precise knowledge of the latest trends in modern art.⁸ The best galleries in the world exhibit at both these fairs, which are a Mecca for collectors, curators and artists. The Swiss are keen collectors and are very much au fait with the latest trends on the modern art scene.⁹

⁷ Sibylle Omlin (2004), *Art from Switzerland. Art Production and the Art System in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Zurich: Pro Helvetia.

⁸ "Sammler reissen sich um boomenden Kunstmarkt", Matthew Allen interviews the head of Sotheby's Zurich, *swissinfo*, 27.08.2006.

⁹ Sammler reissen sich um boomenden Kunstmarkt. Interview von Matthew Allen mit der Leiterin von Sotheby Zürich, *swissinfo*, 27.08.2006.

Private art collections in Switzerland are “alive”, if you like, because collectors are prepared to part with pieces that no longer fit into their collections. The collection of the Winterthur industrialist Oskar Reinhardt, for example, demonstrates the extent of Swiss collectors’ expertise and enthusiasm.

Claudia Steinfels, Director of Sotheby’s Zürich

4. Design in Switzerland

These very same key elements are also characteristic of Swiss design. Whether in industrial design, furniture design, tool design or fashion, the Helvetian nose for quality is joined by perfectionism, a solid education system and curiosity, freshness and sincerity.

World-famous Swiss products tend to be perfectly functioning examples of beautiful design rather than short-lived fad items: one need think only of Le Corbusier’s “Grand Confort” armchair of 1928, Willy Guhl’s cement garden chair of 1954, Vitra furniture, Akris fashions or the venerable Swiss printing tradition, which has brought forth the Helvetica and Frutiger type fonts, among many others, both renowned for their elegant simplicity, as well as the work of Cornel Windlin and Ruedi Baur.

The long years of eminence enjoyed by the embroiderers of St. Gallen, meanwhile, gave rise to the house of Jakob Schlaepfer, one of the world’s leading manufacturers of luxury fabrics. Of course, the traditional embroidery patterns have long since been superseded by comprehensive textile design, encompassing in theory any and all production techniques and materials. As the creative partner of leading designers from the worlds of haute couture and prêt-à-porter, such as Lacroix, Ungaro, Dior, Chanel, Gigli, Armani, Dries van Noten and Gaultier, Jakob Schlaepfer has exported its high-quality fabrics to over 60 countries and thus helped to establish the excellent reputation enjoyed by the Swiss textile industry.

5. Dance and theatre

Curiosity and authenticity are the outstanding features of the vibrant Swiss dance, cabaret and minor arts scene. Maurice Béjart and Heinz Spoerli, two of the world’s most renowned choreographers, are both active in Switzerland. Their successes, and the controversies surrounding them, have fostered the growth of a truly vibrant local contemporary dance culture. Today there are more than 100 companies dancing in Switzerland, whether in an institutional context or as freelance performers.

For its part, Béjart Ballet Lausanne has become a pillar of contemporary dance. Its founder, Maurice Béjart, is one of the most prolific and productive choreographers in the world, leading his troupe on regular tours of the globe and in the 1990s founding the Ecole-Atelier Rudra Béjart, which has since become one of the top training centres for classical dance the world over. Lausanne

Meanwhile, the renown of “dance maker” Heinz Spoerli, director of the Zurich Ballet since 1996, reaches far beyond the borders of Switzerland. The success of his creations is underpinned by such traditional Swiss key elements as a nose for quality (dancers are selected without regard for their nationality), first-class training (by top-ranking ballet masters), a canny refusal to settle for anything but the best (as evinced by the Zurich Ballet’s repertoire policy) and a reliance on proven expertise (the choreographer himself determines the thrust of the repertoire).

6. A lively folk culture

Custom is alive and well in Switzerland, where it continues to play a role in the life of the nation. Three examples, two from the world of culture and one from politics, may be taken as representative of many others: yodelling, alphorn playing, and the local assembly.

The practice of yodelling grew out of the need for long-distance communication between mountain peaks, as well as from the calls used by cowherds in the Alpine region. The alphorn, too, was originally used for sending signals, and did not become a musical instrument in the conventional sense until the end of the 18th century.

The local assembly or *Landsgemeinde*, meanwhile, is a constitutionally enshrined meeting of all citizens eligible to vote in a particular municipality, at which officeholders are elected and official decisions are taken by quorum amid much pomp and ceremony. First known in the late middle ages, the custom has persisted to this day in certain regions of Switzerland.

The Swiss quotidian is thus thoroughly saturated with the design, architecture, art trade, museums and living folk traditions that have made the country famous around the world. In Switzerland, beauty is not segregated from the “ordinary” world and left to flourish on its own, but is rather an authentic, fresh, integral component of the everyday life of the country’s inhabitants. One need only think of the architecture here, where high-quality patrons dot the landscape with high-quality constructions.

Of course, in keeping with the Swiss tradition of discretion, there aren’t many international superlatives among these creations: the highest skyscrapers and the most expensive houses are to be found elsewhere. Rather, the remarkable thing about Switzerland’s architecture is the breadth and variety of its quality, from the highlands to the lowlands, from the outlying regions to the cities.