Four narrative perspectives on Swiss history
at the Swiss National Museum

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Abstract

In 2009, the Swiss National Museum in Zurich chose a new approach for its permanent exhibition, and made a thematic narrative – based on four major research areas of contemporary historiography – the centre of its exhibition rooms. Underpinning this concept was the realisation that the main focus of contemporary research must be reflected in the presentation of history, even if it is in a constant process of change and reformulation. The collection of objects in the National Museum's possession reflects earlier areas of research into Switzerland's cultural history. The second new permanent exhibition, the 'Collections Gallery' reflects this emphasis on collecting, and shows the outstanding pieces in a display that is solely focused on the objects.

In contrast, the permanent exhibition on Swiss history had to find new ways of presentation, since the National Museum's collections have gaps in the areas of political and economic history, as well as in contemporary history. And yet, a new narrative of Swiss history must offer visitors precisely these links between outstanding objects of cultural history and the narrative of a national history, which addresses themes that are not shown in the collection. The four chapters of Swiss history are structured chronologically and enable the historical study of the settlement, religious, political and economic history of Switzerland – from the pre-Christian era to the 21st century. The objects in the collection have now been given 'a new mediality' in the nation's venerable 'Hall of Fame'. The modernity of the scenography, the presentations and arrangements of the objects break with the earlier presentation of political history which was characterized by the depiction of military victories. It now takes the visitor along a path – which can be physically followed – to consensual Swiss democracy and thus makes a contribution to the contemporary understanding of political developments in Switzerland. The other rooms give visitors a picture of Switzerland that is shaped by immigration and emigration, by religious conflicts and splits, by its political system based on consensus as well as early economic successes. The narrative strand links transformational processes with the great ruptures in history, and thus places itself entirely at the service of historical learning, one of the most important tasks of a history museum.

The Swiss National Museum, which is situated next to Zurich's main station, was founded in 1898. In 2016 a modern – and long overdue – extension will be added to the existing building, allowing 19th century historicism to meet modern 21st century architecture. The planning stage for the extension began in 2001, and after several popular referendums and votes in parliament, the project is now finally entering the implementation phase. However, existing buildings need to be renovated first – a process that will take place in several stages. The renovation of the so-called "station wing", was completed in 2008.

In 2006 the director of the museum, Dr. Andreas Spillmann, announced that two new permanent exhibitions would be installed in this part of the museum. These were officially opened on the 1 August 2009, that is, on the same day as the Swiss national holiday.

As work began on the historical exhibition, it became clear that the National Museum's collections were evidence of an early understanding of Swiss cultural history and corresponding fields of research. The Swiss National Museum has collected outstanding arts and crafts objects. In addition to a significant archaeological collection, there has been a focus on collecting military history items (weapons and uniforms), gold and other precious metals, textiles, ceramic stoves, paintings, prints and historical photographs. The acquisitions policy followed that widely adopted by national museums of cultural history in the beginning and in later years. It was therefore self-evident that one of the new permanent exhibitions would be dedicated exclusively to the museum's early collection activities, and that a number of prized objects from the museum's various collections should be put on display. The first exhibition, "Collections Gallery", therefore reflects the Swiss National Museum's collecting activities and shows a variety of exceptional items displayed in a purely object-oriented manner. (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The other permanent exhibition: "Collections Gallery" (© Donat Stuppan, Swiss National Museum).

However, for the second exhibition, "History of Switzerland", new approaches had to be adopted due to gaps in the museum's collections in the areas of political and economic history, as well as recent contemporary history. A new account of Swiss history provides visitors with a link between exhibits of outstanding cultural interest and a narrative of national history covering topics not illustrated by items from the collections.

Preparatory work on this national narrative was developed in collaboration with professors of history from Swiss universities. This group adopted an approach whereby their narrative would be structured into four main sections – four areas of contemporary historical research. This was done with the knowledge that within a few years the concept would already be out of date and probably have to be re-formulated.

A basic decision was taken to dispense with a continuous chronology that would define the organization of whole exhibition. However, each of the exhibition's four sections is in itself structured in a chronological manner. This decision was made in order to avoid focussing on any one period of history in particular. The aim thereby is help people comprehend an overall historical development, without getting too distracted by tangential narratives.

The four sections of the exhibition deal with the following topics: the history of migration, religious history, political history and economic history. A short tour through the exhibition will provide an impression of the overall concept.

Part one: No one has been here all the time

Beginning with the first section, "No one has been here all the time", emphasis has been placed on addressing questions regarding the area now known as Switzerland, immigration and emigration, settlement traces left by past cultures, and finally, the extent to which migration shaped, and continues to shape, Switzerland's development.

Upon entering the gallery, visitors are greeted by the plaster bust of a woman, a reconstruction from the skull of a supposedly typical Swiss woman from the Neolithic Age, which, however, actually dates from the 19th century. This plaster bust, known as "homo alpinus helveticus", caught the imagination of the eugenics movement, which in the 1920s and 1930s tried to research and define a pure Swiss race – a hopeless undertaking as we know nowadays (Figure 2).

As well as looking at (material) traces left behind by people from pre-Christian times, there is a focus on the history of immigration and emigration from the 17th to the 21st century. When one considers immigration, one thinks first of the religious refugees (the Huguenots) and, later on in the 19th century, the political refugees. However, until the end of the 19th century Switzerland was primarily a classic emigration country, and only later became an immigration country.

After the Second World War, Italians started immigrating into Switzerland, where there was a great demand for manual labour to complete huge construction projects, such as the Gotthard railway tunnel in 1880. The arrival of the Italians coincided with the political Right's introduction of the concept of *Überfremdung* (literally "over-foreignization"). In the 1970s there were six national referendums proposing measures to counter "Überfremdung", all of which were rejected. However, it is a political issue that continues to be debated today (and not just in Switzerland), as the exhibition makes clear by exhibiting a referendum poster produced recently by a major Swiss party in conjunction with an initiative aimed at limiting immigration.
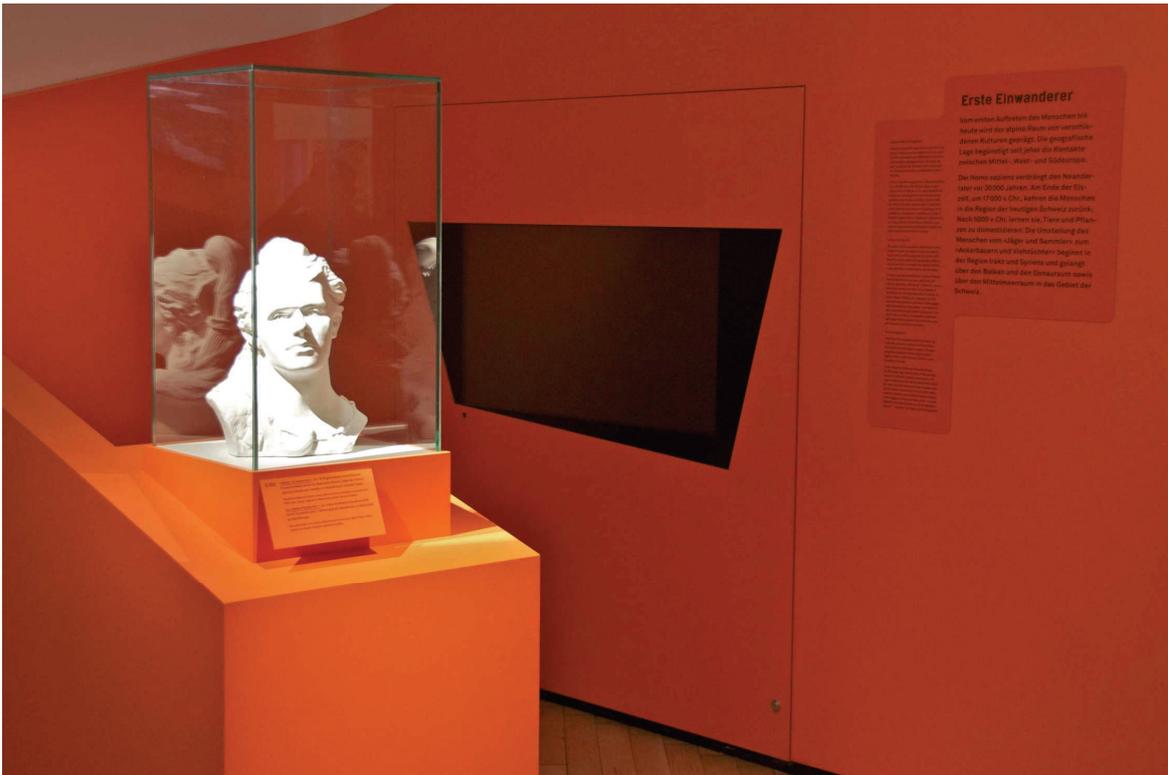
Figure 2: Homo alpinus helveticus – in the entrance of the exhibition (© Donat Stuppan, Swiss National Museum).

Since Switzerland and the EU signed the Freedom of Movement Agreement in 2002 a new group of people has been immigrating into Switzerland: highly qualified Germans that are needed by various highly specialized sectors of the Swiss economy. At the end of this section of the exhibition the visitor's attention is drawn to this development.

Part two: Faith, diligence and order

Now let's look at the second part of the exhibition: "Faith, diligence and order". This section is entirely devoted to religious history – with the focus being, naturally, on the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism, and the turning point of the Reformation at the beginning of the 16th century.

Before continuing with the narrative it is necessary to focus on the exhibition design. Two staged spaces are used to comment on the role of architecture in exhibition design. To answer the important questions of how did the curators see the role of architecture and what can be accomplished with exhibition design? (Figures 3 & 4). The designers of this exhibition considered the scenography as fulfilling three roles:

- Exhibition design is communication. Visitors interpret whatever they see. They try to extract statements from the form and arrangement of the material presented, which is why scenographers and curators are always aware that architecture can be used to make statements. The exhibition design "carries" the subject; i.e. it incorporates its contextual guidelines and principle ideas.

- Exhibition design must create atmospheres, a resonance between space, object and spectator: *"Ein Miteinander von Raum, Objekt und Person (Janelli 2008: 49)* The main focus is

on the sensations engendered by the room, the way the room is perceived by the visitor. *"Durch die Schaffung von starken Athmosphären eröffnen sich den Besuchern Möglichkeiten für ästhetische Erfahrungen, die zur Reflexion der eigenen Meinung anregen"* (Janelli, 2008: 46)

- Exhibition design is interpretation. The way something is displayed is already an interpretation – and this is true not only of the narrative and the choice of objects or texts: scenography, which plays an essential role in the exhibition, is subject to the same fundamental principles of representation in museums.

Figure 3: View to the first room of the second part of the exhibition: religious history (© Donat Stuppan, Swiss National Museum).

These three points are clearly demonstrated in the two rooms devoted to the medieval world of religion and the Reformation. First a space evoking the medieval world of religion – then a break: A space designed in a deliberately sparse manner, mainly in grey, is evocative of the churches stripped of decoration and beheaded saints – the visitor is made to realize that he is in the Reformation room. Statements are accentuated by the scenography. In these two rooms the visitor, the "perceiving subject" (Jannelli, Hammacher, 2008: 47), experiences an abrupt change (of style), a break that in reality one does not encounter in this form or to this extent).

Figure 4: The Reformation room (© Donat Stuppan, Swiss National Museum).

The exhibition continues along a corridor, where the subject is the Counter-Reformation, the Catholic reform in the Catholic Church heralded by the Council of Trent, including for example the consolidation of the church authorities, adhering to celibacy, establishing seminaries (founding of a Jesuit College in Switzerland).

From here one has access to the so-called Hall of Fame. But just before the impressive arch becomes visible, the visitor is confronted with the history of the exclusion and persecution of Anabaptists, Jews and witches. In a narrow corridor the history of these heretics is told by images of torture and exclusion by both the Catholic *and* Protestant church of the 16th and 17th century.

If you enter the Hall of Fame directly to the left, you find yourself in an area dealing with the Enlightenment and the introduction of compulsory education for all children, which is where the second part of the exhibition ends.

Part three: Through conflict to concordance.

The third section of the exhibition is devoted to political history and is called "Through conflict to concordance". This part of the exhibition is located in the Hall of Fame, mainly on a wooden ramp that is modelled on a mountain pass road: Visitors are greeted by a nine-metre-high "Wheel of Myths" (Figure 5) that is, as it were, driving the development of national "myths". Within the wheel, Swiss myths and stereotypes are presented: crossbows, cowbells and Heidi. It is the wheel of history, the wheel of constantly recurring historical images, familiar to – and made use of by – every nation.
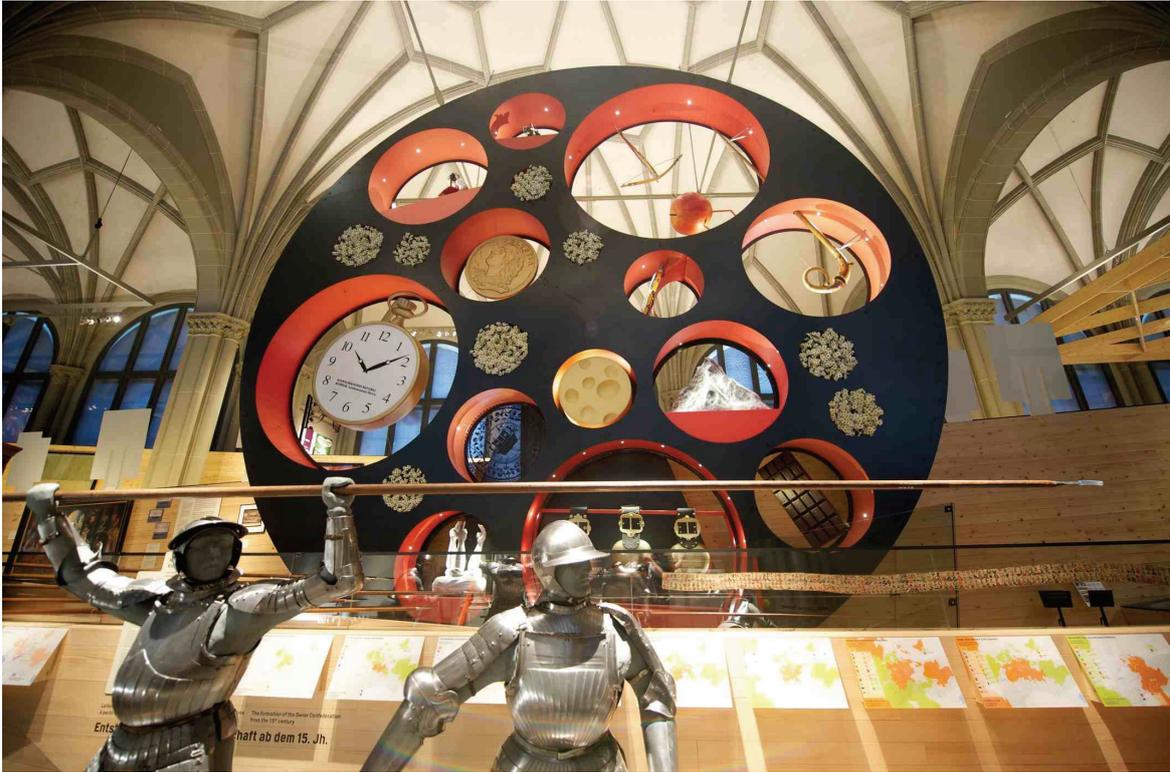
Figure 5: The "wheel of myths" (© Donat Stuppan, Swiss National Museum).

However, the narrative begins with the ascent up the mountain pass road punctuated by a series of display cases that relate stories of military conflicts, political unions, and the way in which the federal state finally came into being in 1848. Along the way one encounters, among other items, the famous royal Gobelin tapestry – one of the museum's outstanding exhibits. It shows Louis XIV at the signing of a mercenary alliance with the confederates – one of the most striking testimonies to the close ties between France and the Confederation.

At the top of the ramp we come to an area dealing with the founding of the state and the constitution, and a (modified) reconstruction of the Federal Council Chamber. The desks have been fitted with monitors providing information on the Swiss political system and the premises and history of the political parties. This serves mainly as a complementary resource for school groups studying the political system.

The final section is devoted to two major social conflicts, or strike movements, that arose at the beginning of the 20th century: the *Landestreik* (the general strike) of 1918 and the campaign for women's voting rights. It should be remembered that it was only in 1971 that Swiss women obtained the right to vote.

A projection visible from this point shows images of Europe's battlefields during the First and Second World Wars, illustrating the disaster that threatened from abroad at this time. This subject is further addressed on the lower floor, under the wooden ramp. Various aspects of the role played by Switzerland, a country spared the horrors of these wars, are looked at here, such as refugee policy, economic links with Nazi Germany, mobilization and the everyday lives of people in Switzerland. The area leading to the exit of the third section of the exhibition is dedicated to a film footage relating to the Cold War and the consequences it had for Switzerland. In the 1990s Switzerland was much criticized for its long-dormant assets, bank secrecy laws and fiscal policy, all of which gave rise to

diplomatic disagreements and foreign intervention. A media station displays extracts from foreign news media covering this period.

Figure 6: The room of proto – industrialization (© Donat Stuppan, Swiss National Museum).

Part four: Switzerland becomes rich abroad

The fourth and final section of the exhibition is called "Switzerland becomes rich abroad", and is devoted to economic history. The visitor's attention is drawn to Swiss products, as well as the stories and people behind them. Switzerland is a rich country, and in the next two rooms questions such as "How did Switzerland become rich?" or "Where does this prosperity come from?" are examined.

Switzerland's success is partially based on the textile industry, which is presented in the first room, (Figure 6) which deals with the period of proto-industrialization: A hand loom stands in the middle of the room, while on the walls and in the display cases one can see the products – the textiles – that in many places were being produced by a cottage industry, and were already being exported successfully. Other topics include the history of the mercenary, and the trade in foreign produce and textiles, which made some merchants extremely wealthy at this time.

Figure 7: The room of industrialization: in the center of the room: the alternating current generator of 1895 (© Donat Stuppan, Swiss National Museum).

In the second room, which deals with the Age of Industrialization (Figure 7), three large banks of display cases feature not only textiles, but also important Swiss watches, milk products and chocolate. In the centre of the room stands a symbol of the machine industry, an alternating current generator made by a major Swiss company. The back row of display cases covers the history of the chemical industry, which started to take off at the beginning of the 20th century.

The last room is devoted to the history of banking and the significance of Switzerland as a financial centre. The ascent of the major Swiss banks started during the second half of the 19th century, when banks put aside capital – in addition to capital invested by Germany, England and France – to finance large-scale infrastructure projects. In the centre of this room, as a symbol of financial power and glory, stands a customer safe from a large bank. In some of the safe's deposit boxes visitors can find references to critical aspects of this highly topical subject: banking secrecy, lists of long-dormant assets, tax evasion, etc. (Figure 8). The history of banking concludes our tour through the 1200m^2 exhibition, and leads us to the question of the narrative of national history.

**Figure 8: The room of the history of banking: the customer safe of 1912
(© Donat Stuppan, Swiss National Museum).**

The narrative of national history

Before reflecting on the Swiss National Museum's narrative, let us underline some basic principles that define the various components of a narrative:

An open view of history (Sommer-Sieghart, M., 2009: 77): Rather than getting bogged down in negation and a frantic deconstruction of old images and narratives, one should reflect on what national history can actually achieve. At the heart of this discussion is always the question of how democracy evolved (a process that happened much earlier in Switzerland than in other European states – and of course not without conflicts). This is why political history is central to our permanent exhibition, and why this subject is dealt with in our Hall of Fame of the Nation, which used to be concerned with military history.

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Constant interaction with influences from abroad: No narrative of national history is possible without a contextual understanding. It is important to convey to visitors the great extent to which Switzerland has been shaped by foreign influences, immigration, and the cultural achievements and discoveries that foreigners have contributed.

The constructive character of the storyline should be discernible: Thus, objects should be carefully chosen, texts formulated in a scientifically correct manner (avoid texts claiming to divulge "the truth"), and authors clearly identified. The goal is to make the constructed nature of history "readable" by dividing the narrative into four sections – the aim is to neither produce a linear nor a teleological narrative. Reconstructions (such as the huge statue of the so called *"Wehrwille"* (the will to defend), or the model of the Müstair Monastery) help us to realize that a narrative always represents a construction and an interpretation. Any elements of the exhibition design that exaggerate or are monumental, entertaining or playful are admissible as techniques – they are communication tools and as such contribute to the process of conveying the narrative.

The investigative horizon of the visitors is channelled by the exhibition's curator, the aim being to create information platforms that are as large as possible: texts that are eclectic yet easy to understand, media stations as additional sources of information, and lounges where visitors can not only relax but also consolidate what they have learnt through additional reading.

Conclusion

A history museum is a place to learn about history, even if the museum lends itself to a particular way of learning. Lepenies (2003) describes learning experiences during a visit to the museum as an unintended but welcome side effect. She calls it "collateral learning" - a specific learning that museums should be more aware of. In light of this, the curators approach to the content should be neither over-didactic or disabusive, and certainly not ideological. But it should adopt an approach whereby history is explained. We aim to encourage an understanding of how Switzerland became the country it is today. The narrative helps to answer questions concerning identity and common values. And at the same time it serves to further our understanding of how a state functions. It is important for Switzerland to realize that multiple narratives are at play here – that the Swiss live in a pluralistic society, in a country of different identities and languages. There is not one but a multitude of factors that explain how the political system has developed. To understand the state (of Switzerland) as it is today and to recognize its achievements, it is important to understand not only the way economic and political systems have evolved, but also the country's religious and cultural developments.

Our narrative links these processes of transformation with major turning points in history and explores the various connections. Nowadays, a linear narrative style – i.e. the classic chronological and monothematic master narrative – seems to have been largely superseded in many museums. The focus is now more on representing different – and sometimes opposing – processes and developments. Omissions and gaps are the price one has to pay for this more open interpretation of history. As are original objects that often have to be replaced by reconstructions and models in order to support the narrative being presented. Scenography therefore plays a decisive role in this approach and is possibly the curator's most important narrative tool.

The Swiss National Museum has decided to pursue this direction by presenting four narrative perspectives aimed at making Swiss history more accessible.

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