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MEDIA TEXT

2008 was a successful year for the Swiss National Museums: more visitors, important additions to the collections, and substantial progress in respect of the new Museums Act. In 2009, the Swiss Museums Group is looking to maintain its broad appeal, notably with the new permanent exhibitions in the renovated station wing of the National Museum in Zurich.

The Swiss National Museums once again recorded an increase in visitor numbers last year, with a five percent rise from 229,855 in 2007 to 241,289 in 2008. This figure no longer includes the Museum of Music Automats, which was integrated directly into the Federal Office of Culture on 1 January 2008.

The popularity of the Swiss National Museum in Zurich remained strong. Although renovation work was in full swing during 2008, rendering the entire station wing (the heart of the museum) inaccessible to the public, visitor numbers rose by a further 14 percent, from 108,982 to 124,279. The main contributors to this impressive increase were two exhibitions – «Maria Magdalena Mauritius» and «FAMILIES – the constant is change» – each of which were attended by some 50,000 people.

The Museum Bärengrasse, the Swiss Customs Museum in Cantine de Gandria and the Collections Centre in Affoltern am Albis also attracted more visitors. At Château de Prangins and Schloss Wildegg, visitor numbers were also high, though in line with those for the previous year. The Forum of Swiss History and Zunfthaus zur Meisen in Zurich, by contrast, proved less popular than in 2007.

Due to building regulations, the courtyard of the National Museum in Zurich was inaccessible because of ongoing renovation work. The rooms in the building and the courtyard itself were unavailable for hire during the year (the number of people visiting the museum complex without attending an exhibition totalled 199,926 in 2007 and 71,690 in 2008).

The 2009 exhibition programme

In 2009, the Swiss National Museum in Zurich will be retaining its familiar concept of smaller-scale temporary displays in parallel with two major special exhibitions per year. April sees the opening of "WITZERLAND", which looks at Swiss humour, wit and satire, followed in autumn by a further exhibition showcasing the museum's own collection. This time around, the subject is historic photographs from the Swiss section of the Herzog collection, which were recently added to the museum's holdings and cover the period from 1840 to 1950.

One of the undoubted highlights of the year for the Swiss National Museum Zurich is the reopening of the renovated station wing, with two completely new permanent exhibitions covering an area of 2,400m² and entitled «HISTORY OF SWITZERLAND» and «COLLECTIONS GALLERY». The former examines key aspects of contemporary history, such as the Swiss economy and the road to direct democracy. It covers the history of settlement and migration, faith and culture. «COLLECTIONS GALLERY» comprises examples of outstanding craftsmanship, with background information on the people who created and used them, as well as changing tastes and styles.

Starting in May 2009, the Forum of Swiss History features an exhibition on one of Switzerland's most familiar creations: «The Swiss Army knife – a tool that's become an icon» explores unfamiliar aspects of its contribution to cultural history. The exhibition is being staged in association with Victorinox, the company based in Ibach-Schwyz that makes many of the knives.

Château de Prangins has teamed up with the Swiss Foundation of Photography for a major exhibition looking at photography in the 1930s. Opening in June 2009, the exhibition is entitled «Conflit d'images. Photographie suisse des années 30». Through a series of 120 works, it invites visitors to learn more about a crucial turning point in historical photography.

In a drive to exploit synergies within the Swiss Museums Group, exhibitions will once again transfer to new locations in 2009. In December, «À la vôtre! Zum Wohl! Salute!» moves from Château de Prangins to the Forum of Swiss History, while in November, «The Swiss Army knife – a tool that's become an icon» moves from Schwyz to its new home at the Château.

At the Zunfthaus zur Meisen, Zurich, the permanent exhibition that opened its doors in 2008 will be supplemented by small exhibitions in the temporary display, including «Arnold Zahner (1919–2005): the art of glazing».

At Schloss Wildegg, the season opens with «Von Angesicht zu Angesicht – Familienbilder erzählen ihre Geschichten», followed two months later by «Giftpflanzen», an exhibition by the Botanical Garden, St. Gallen.

A major addition to the collection

The Swiss National Museums recently had the unique opportunity to acquire the Swiss section of the Herzog photography collection. The purchase was made possible by generous donations from two foundations and a gift from the collectors Peter and Ruth Herzog, of Basel. The new acquisition complements and enriches the Swiss Museums Group's historical photography holdings. The National Museums now possess the largest collection of documentary photography in Switzerland, thereby helping to preserve the visual record of Switzerland and its population.

Another high point was a collection kindly donated by a descendant of the Zurich family of Lavater: 62 portraits representing no fewer than seven generations of one of the city's most prominent families, as well as two exceptional photographs, are now owned by the Swiss National Museums.

The new Museums Act

On 14 February 2008 the Committee for Science, Education and Culture of the Council of States gave first approval to the report and draft of a new federal law on federal museums and collections. In March 2008, the Council of States unanimously approved the report and draft law with a vote of 28:0, and forwarded it to the Committee for Science, Education and Culture of the National Council. The proposal was then unanimously approved at the two-day sitting on 23-24 October 2008.

The Swiss National Museums, which have until now been part of the Federal Office of Culture, are to be transferred to a public-law institution and given greater autonomy. The name «Swiss National Museum» (SNM) will also become the organisation's official title. During 2009, the proposal will move to the National Council. Final approval of the new federal law is expected in the spring 2009 session, and the «Federal Museums and Collections Act» is scheduled to come into force in January 2010.

Renovation and expansion of the Swiss National Museum in Zurich

The process of renovating the station wing, which began in 2005, is nearing completion. At the end of February this year, it will be handed over and work can begin on setting up the two new permanent exhibitions in the Säulenhalle on the ground floor and the Ruhmeshalle on the floor above.

The formal application for the expansion's construction was filed with the Zurich city structural engineering department on 31 January last year, and approval was granted on 9 June.

The Federal Council, cantonal governments and the city of Zurich support the plan to expand the Swiss National Museum, Zurich. The federal councils approved the applications for financing at the end of 2008, and these were then submitted to the cantonal council. The municipal council will debate the issue in spring 2009. Under the current plan, the extension should be ready for inauguration in 2013.

Building work at Schloss Wildegg

Major progress on the renovation of Schloss Wildegg in Aargau was made in 2008. Work on the remaining seven rooms was carried out and completed during the summer months, and they have now been beautifully restored. In some rooms, openings in the walls offer a glimpse of the older, underlying constructions. Discussions concerning the condition and décor in which the salon, one of the main rooms in the castle, is to be preserved are still ongoing, but this final room will be finished in 2009, at which point the renovation work will be complete.

For further information

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