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Museums in Switzerland – Overview

By David Vuillaume, Director, Swiss Museums Association

The co-existence of public and private museums, their collaboration and the element of competition between them, has remained unchanged throughout the history of Swiss museums. Amerbach's private art collection and library, which includes works by Dürer and Holbein, was acquired for example by the City and University of Basel in 1661 making it one of the first collections under public ownership in the history of museums. In the 19th century, the bourgeois circles initiated and financed the construction of numerous public museums. A real explosion in the creation of museums happened at the end of the 20th century. Most of the numerous museums projects nowadays are based on a public-private partnership.

The almost 1,100 museums listed by the Association of Swiss Museums Association form a remarkable cultural network throughout the country from the big cities to remote mountain regions. About 400 museums are dedicated to local and regional heritage, and over 180 boast an art collection. A third of the Swiss museums is owned by the public authorities, another third is established by associations and 20 percent are owned by private foundations. The museums are very well frequented, recording 18 million visitors in 2010. The objective of the Swiss Museums Association, founded in 1966, is to represent the variety of the Swiss museum landscape in its entirety, especially in view of the authorities and the general public. At the request of its members, it is fiercely committed to quality matters as it provides norms and standards right across the board.

Whilst the Swiss Museums Association networks institutions at a national level, the museum professionals come together within ICOM Switzerland. Furthermore there are numerous networks of museums working at regional, cantonal and local levels. Depending on the location, they are either under the direct management of the authorities, formed as an association or as a free network without legal status. The structures are often light since the most important factor for these networks is to be functional and efficient.

Even though the Swiss economy is dependent on the European market, it remains unscathed by the European debt crisis. This is understandable due to its political situation - Switzerland is not a member of the European Union - and to the sound management of its sovereign debt. Furthermore, the diversified financing of museums equally shields them from abrupt cuts in their budget. Finally it is worth mentioning that museums benefit from the fact that they are highly appreciated both by people all over the country and the political and economic decision-makers. Having said that, Swiss museums follow the existential debates that are held in several European countries with great interest. Swiss museums are interested in reflecting on the basis of their actions, whether they are in a time of crisis or not.

In most of Swiss museums the development of exhibitions and face-to-face exchange are considered to be more important than publishing collections in the form of a virtual museum. However, more and more institutions are experimenting with the instruments of Web 2.0 in their communications

activities. The question of participation goes well beyond the technical means available. The museum is increasingly seen (by the public as well as the professionals) as a forum where positions and views (both historic and artistic) are propositions to be discussed by the visitor-citizen. This phenomenon goes hand in hand with the current system of semi-direct democracy in Switzerland. Museums simultaneously strengthen their role as permanent training institutions in response to the requests made by the public, the professionals and politics.

The public has very high expectations of museums. In order to satisfy these, the museums have to constantly adapt the quality of their services. Since this is an expensive exercise, it is likely that museums will work towards a concentrated collaboration in the future. Ideally, not by merging institutions to save financial means, but by creating common services (storage, research, education, communication) to assure the best quality, even in museums of a modest size.

Website of the Swiss museums

→ www.museums.ch

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