

Aufbruch in die Gegenwart. Switzerland in photographs 1840 – 1960

23rd October 2009 – 28th February 2010

Temporary exhibition in the National Museum, Zurich

TOUR THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition in three sections, each in a separate room, recounts the history of Switzerland from various viewpoints; the visitor can look into private and public areas, some of which may be surprising and touching, some will probably be disturbing or nostalgic. The pictures cover the period from the early days of the newly-created federal state to modern Switzerland of the 1960's.

Room 1

From an agrarian state to one of industries and services

Until 1850 most of the Swiss population was engaged in farming. At that time the first photographic pioneers appeared. Many of them were foreign tourists, fascinated by the untouched mountains. With their photos they popularised the concept of a wild, romantic Switzerland. Thereafter more and more Swiss began to develop a photographic eye for the beauties of their country, and to provide the growing tourism industry with the pictures it required. Many professional photographers and an increasing number of amateurs set about recording the growth and development of modern Switzerland and the far-reaching changes for its citizens in their work and their private lives.

Room 2

A country is opened up

The decisive element in the transformation of Switzerland, in the development of the tourism industry and in international trade, was the opening up of the country by means of a modern transport infrastructure. This was one of the prime subjects for Swiss photographers. Pictures record the permanent expansion of the road and railway networks and the construction of airports. From the start, the trains and work on the railways held a special fascination for photographers. The pictures they have left us give an impression of bold undertakings and the extremely difficult labour involved.

Room 3

Everyday heroes

The focus of the third part of the exhibition is on the people who contributed significantly to these epoch-making transformations: the greater and lesser heroes of everyday. With regard to the photographs of persons, it should be pointed out that in the early days of the medium, for reasons of expense, these were restricted almost exclusively to the nobility and upper classes. They were able to display themselves and their surroundings in a representative manner. However, the medium soon lost the charm of novelty and photographers were obliged to lower their prices in order to attract other classes of society. By 1900 a photographic portrait was within the means of all sections of the population. Anyone could now be the star in his own family album.

The photos displayed in this room reveal this process of democratisation and show that each member of society can be regarded as an everyday hero within the Swiss community.

Portraits of men, women and children through the years 1840 to 1960 will be shown in a projection room. Here the visitor comes face to face with his ancestors and can see how poses and fashions have changed over the years.