

MARIA MAGDALENA MAURITIUS

Dealing with Saints

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SAINTS on visit at the Swiss National Museum

MARIA, MAGDALENA, MAURITIUS and a goodly number of well-known and lesser-known saints make their appearance in a show of wooden sculptures at the Swiss National Museum. The special exhibition introduces visitors to the tremendous impact that biblical figures, patron saints and martyrs made on medieval society and everyday life. It also highlights the publication of the catalogue «Wooden sculptures of the Middle Ages», whose two volumes take stock of the museum's outstanding collection of sacred art. A collection which is unique both on a national and international level.

How did individual statues or figures displayed on church altars and during processions mark the events of the medieval church year? What was the significance of a wooden Christ figure astride a wooden donkey being led through the streets on Palm Sunday? And what did people hope for when appointing a particular holy figure the patron saint of a town or a country or the auxiliary saint for a particular disease? How do we recognize today which one of the numerous saints is represented by a particular sculpture? How were these works of art treated under the age of the Reformation, notorious for its rejection of religious images? How do we deal with them today?

The exhibition proposes answers to questions such as these and many more. With the help of original objects from the Middle Ages it illustrates historical facts and ecclesiastical traditions. While being led through the events of the church year, visitors encounter biblical figures; statues of the Holy Virgin from different centuries visualize the change her features underwent in the course of time. Special attention is given to the age of the Reformation, when holy statues were removed or burned, making room for the text of the Bible as the only path towards divine truth.

The collection's most ancient statue, a Romanesque madonna, has survived to this day thanks to the pious handling it got from the parishioners of Raron, canton of Valais. When the colourful wood carving was considered out of style, the faithful buried it in the Raron charnel-house among the bones and skulls of their deceased. Citizens of Zurich or Berne chose a wholly different approach, when, giving in to reformatory iconoclasm, they smashed or burned all saintly statues.

Medieval music accompanies the visitor on his tour. Music as an universal language underlines the special exhibition's message: to further the newly awakened interest in the sacred sculptures of the Middle Ages, transcending confessional or religious barriers.

A new catalogue of the collection



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Confédération suisse
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Departament federal da l'intern DFI
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Office fédéral de la culture OFC
Ufficio federale della cultura UFC
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The opening of the exhibition is also accompanied by the publication of a new catalogue taking stock of the museum's collection of medieval wooden sculptures. Its two volumes list the 400 statues and 20 altarpieces dating from the 11th century up to 1550. The text mirrors the results of the latest research in the fields of cultural history, history of the arts, technology and natural science and points out the objects' former function. New photographs were taken of all sculptures, showing front and back, while a number of illustrations focus on typical details. Catalogue and exhibition amplify and supplement each other. The exhibition is founded on the two volumes' scientific findings, while the catalogue is provided with a third dimension by means of the exhibition.

Catalogue in two volumes by Dione Flühler-Kreis and Peter Wyer, photographs by Donat Stuppan

Die Holzskulpturen des Mittelalters

Katalog der Sammlung des Schweizerischen Landesmuseums, I Einzelfiguren, II Altarretabel und Retabelfiguren.

746 pages, appr. 1000 illustrations, ISBN 978-3-908025-69-6. CHF 240.–, on sale at the museum shop; subscription price (up to end of 2007) CHF 190.–, also available by e-mail: claud.chappuis@slm.admin.ch.

Side events

The exhibition is accompanied by a number of special events and arrangements such as guided tours for adults and families, Christmas tours and city tours. Schools can apply for tours or workshops, available on different levels and worked out in collaboration with *schule&kultur* (Zurich school department). The Volkshochschule Zürich (people's university) also offers a series of lectures by different speakers, including a workshop visit. For detailed programs please consult www.heilige.ch.

Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday, 10am to 5 pm, Thursdays 10am to 8pm, also opened on Christmas / New Year

Further information on exhibition and side events under www.heilige.ch

All media texts and a selection of illustrations are ready for downloading on our homepage www.heilige.ch under «press».

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