

MARIA MAGDALENA MAURITIUS

Dealing with Saints

November 9, 2007 – March 24, 2008

A TOUR OF THE EXHIBITION

Climbing the stairs to the showrooms on the second floor, visitors get a stern welcome by **Saint Maurice or Mauritius** whose wooden statue adorns the balustrade. Along with Mary Magdalene, Mauritius has been appointed patron saint of the exhibition at the Swiss National Museum.

Every year on September 22, the town of Saint-Maurice in the canton of Valais celebrates the memory of the martyr saint and commander of the Theban legion. A solemn mass followed by a procession evokes the death of Mauritius and his followers who died defending the Christian faith. A video beamer projects impressions of this year's feast day. They introduce visitors to the exhibition's main theme and to a tradition that is still very much alive.

Through a gate they now enter the main part of the exhibition, first following the **ecclesiastical year** of the Middle Ages. Rather than adhering to chronological order, two thematic spheres present **Christmas and Easter festivities** by means of wooden statues from the museum's collections. A number of medieval paintings on wood panels from the church of Zillis (copies), canton of Grison, show the succession of holidays through the church year.

A **canopy altar (retabel)** at the end of the corridor marks the end of our stroll through the ecclesiastical year. This beautiful piece from Raron, canton of Valais, stands for the growing importance of the altarpiece (retabel) in the 15th and 16th centuries, when the altar with moveable wing panels became the central item of church furnishing. More than half of the sacred statues in the museum's collections originally were part of an altarpiece.

The retabel's shrine figure, representing Mary with her son, serves as an introduction to the adjacent room. It presents **ten statues of the Virgin**, illustrating the change in expression from the strictly hieratic figures of the 12th century to the lovely madonna preferred by worshippers in the late Middle Ages and at the beginning of the 16th century. The collection's most ancient madonna, with much of its original painting still intact, is presented next door, in the representation of a **charnel-house**. The statues found in the former charnel-house of Raron, canton of Valais, remind visitors of the way in which statues were disposed of when no longer needed or when out of fashion: they were piously laid to rest among the bones and skulls of the deceased.

Visitors now enter the show room devoted to **the saints**. Patron saints of countries, cities or monasteries such as Nicholas von Flue, Gall, Fridolin, Theodul or Verena are confronted with the legends bearing on their lives, along with auxiliary and everyday saints revered throughout the Christian world: Christophorus, James the Elder, Sebastian, Barbara, Catherine or Margarete.

The statue of Mary Magdalen, looked upon as indecent by the reformers, introduces visitors to the show room entitled **Words, not Images** («Wort statt Bild»). Here, statues are replaced by quotations from leading reformers on how to deal with so-called «papist» images.

How to preserve sculptures that were considered out of style and therefore lost their place in chapels or churches? This question is discussed in the final part of the tour, in a room defining **the museum as sanctuary** for sacred works of art.