

Switzerland in comic-strips : draw me a Helvetia

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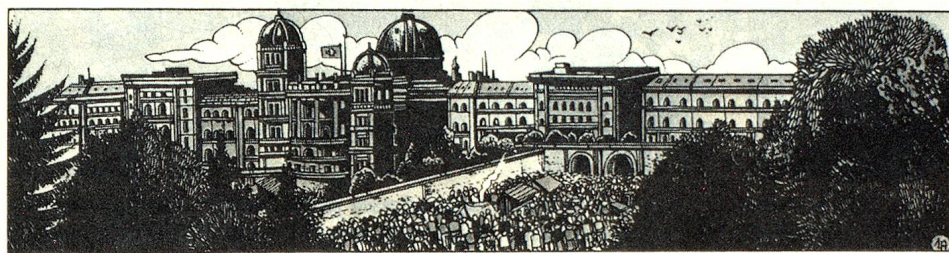
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Switzerland in comic-strips

Draw me a Helvetia

The fifth event of a comics festival which enjoys increasing popularity will take place at Sierre in June. An occasion to ask ourselves how the great names from the world of the little cartoon heroes see our country and how they pigeonhole it.



The Federal Parliament Building in Berne – with a difference ... (From Lesueur and Christin's «Waiting for the Spring»).

For five years now this rendezvous has been kept – and indeed well kept – in Sierre. Next June the attractive Valais town will see all the comic-strip fans of Switzerland and Liechtenstein flocking to the show; 15,000 visitors in 1983, 33,000 in 1987 and certainly more this year. Scheduled for 9th to 12th June, the festival will welcome Poland as guest of honour and, in particular, will house a first exhibition of work by Hugo Pratt. And, of course, we shall be able to see many luminaries of the Ninth Art rolling up their sleeves and sharpening their pencils to sign a lot of autographs and picture albums for a lot of fans. The little show at Sierre is in fact greatly appreciated by the artists for its warm and intimate character. Perhaps craftsmanship and creativity come rather more to the fore here than in the huge French comic-strip supermarket of Angoulême at the end of January.

Obviously, viewed from Sierre through the haze of the Fendant vineyards, Switzerland looks as pretty as a picture postcard. But beyond the touristic clichés, what sort of a picture do the great comics cartoonists get of our country? What happens to their heroes as they gad about between Geneva and Romanshorn – supposing, of course they are so inclined, which is by no means evident.

«Tintin in Switzerland» is the title of an album of doubtful authenticity, one of the many pirate editions of a pornographic character instigated by the work of Hergé. Apart from this curiosity, we have had to wait for quite a long time before the little reporter decided to land in Geneva, in «The

Tournesol Affair» (1956). Previously we had seen him all over the place, from the Congo to the moon, passing through Egypt, Peru, Scotland, China or Syldavia. Less



Courageous climbing party (From «Asterix in Switzerland»).

cosmic in his travels, Astérix the Gaul also had a few bones to pick with the Goths, the Normans, Cleopatra of the East and the barbarians of Hispania before venturing to the shores of Lake Geneva in «Asterix in Switzerland» (1970).

So, on the whole, it looks as if our land lacked the exoticism to attract the comic-strip adventurers until they had done the tour of the far horizons and had gotten a bit long in the tooth. Nevertheless, the trip was successful. In conjuring up the kidnapping of Professor Tournesol at Nyon by agents of the mythical eastern state of Borduria, who were fascinated by the military applications of his research into supersonics, Hergé put his name to one of his best cartoon albums – a work of cleverly-dosed suspense and humour. Helvetian cleanliness, obviously, was singled out, as the two Duponts, disguised as Alpine herdsmen, come a cropper on the highly-polished floor of a clinic. Otherwise, there are very few clichés in «The Tournesol Affair» whereas «Asterix in Switzerland» strains its ingenuity to pile them up.

Sent into the Alps by their druid to pick edelweiss needed for the preparation of a potion, Astérix and Obélix hide in numbered safes, suffer the ravages of yodelling and discover that the Helvetians, in other respects a courageous people, have the bizarre custom, having once pitched into their adversaries, then to care for them with devotion. Uderzo and Goscinny also take enormous, though malicious, pleasure in setting the scene for the Helvetian obsession with correctness, the somnolent bowing and scraping at international, interminable discussions or the exasperation of the Romans who wear themselves out trying to persuade their vassals that an orgy: «is supposed to be dirty, by Jupiter!»

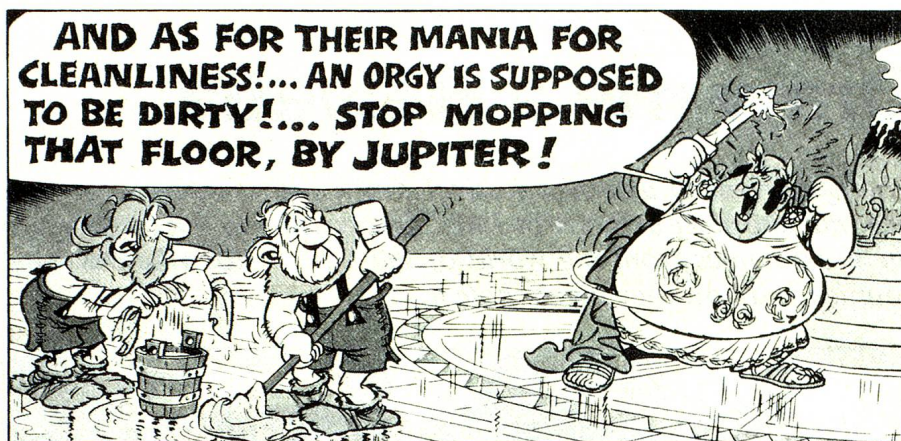
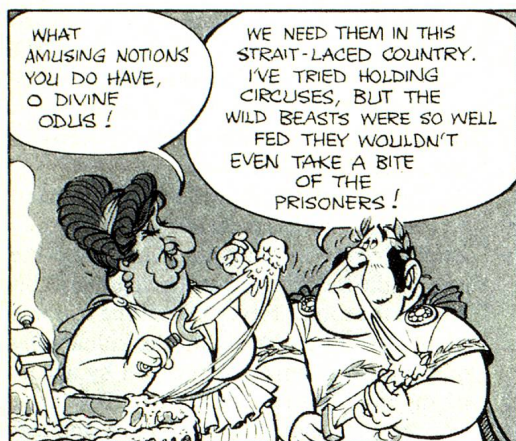
Switzerland, land of asylum? That, it is, in any case, in the imagination of cartoonists

Consulting

on the division
of estates according to Swiss
inheritance law:
Inventory, financial plan,
estate division contract,
powers of attorney,
taxes, company law



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The Romans have problems with cheese fondue and the Helvetian mania for cleanliness (From «Asterix in Switzerland»).

Lesueur and Christin who, in an album with the title «Waiting for the Spring» (1978) depict a wave of revolutions which shake the world and cause the exodus of myriads of refugees to our country. Here we see Parliament Square in Berne turned into an eastern marketplace, junks plying the lake of Geneva, Touaregs moving their herds up to the mountain pastures and other piquant exoticism. Yet in contrast to the petty reality of the 1980s, the authorities depicted by Lesueur and Christin try, politely, to find everyone shelter in the «secret numbered cellars» of the big banks which have been turned into flats.

Jacques Martin, cartoonist father of Alix and Lefranc, also thinks that Switzerland is essentially «hospitable», to the point where this master of the Belgian school chose, like Pratt, to come and live here, in 1984 – for reasons, he assures us, which are «only partly for tax purposes» (his mother was born in Basle and he always loved to come and ski in Switzerland). Two of the adventures of Lefranc, «The Lair of the Wolf» and «The Borg Mystery» were set, respectively, in the mountains of the Valais and the Bernese Oberland where the infamous Axel Borg, archtype of the unscrupulous adventurer, prepares for a monstrous bacteriological

war... But our country has not finished trembling: in the next album, where the action is played out at CERN, the indefatigable Lefranc is to save Geneva from an apocalyptic fate – on which Jacques Martin, with a sardonic smile on his lips, prefers to remain silent.

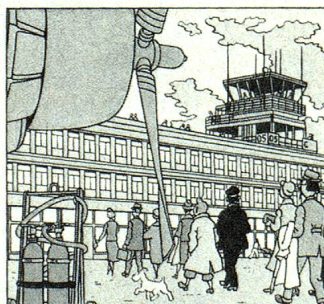
However, although the adventure comic-strip cartoon is normally foredoomed to the ritual of a happy ending, today we see visions which are more in accord with Swiss reality. Thus, «White Requiem», by Rochette and Legrand, in which our country appears as the last floe of flotsam, policed by a deliquescent Occident. In the year 2024 the United States of Africa and the Emporium of the East share a planet which the fanatics of the Party of the White Legitimacy would reconquer by terrorist attacks and pharmacochemical plots. This all takes place in a wan and frightened Zurich of cold avenues finely chiselled under a leaden sky. Booby-trapped by a narrative both complex and austere, the personae seem to be struggling against a reality which crumbles. In the manner of that Fritz Zorn, the cancer patient of the Zurich «Gold Coast», whose cry has been transposed in comic-strip form by Alex and Daniel Varenne. Well-known authors of an excellent saga called «Ardour»

(an odyssey in an atomised Europe), the Varenne brothers have hit just the right note to be able to categorise this masterpiece that is «Mars». In 27 graceful yet tortured pages, their literary narrative «Fear and Anger» tears the veil from a threadbare harmony and shows the naked, heart-wrenching picture of a Switzerland orderly unto death.

So at last the little cartoon characters catch up with the social reality of a Switzerland no longer always coated with milk chocolate – with a risk of new clichés of course, such as are seen time and again in certain Swiss films: Switzerland equals capital, equals coldness, equals boredom, etc. Yet these recent portrayals are but evidence of the first real attempts to approach Switzerland with the eyes of an adult.

Long outside the pigeonholes, like a blind, soft spot on a seething continent, our country is beginning to intrigue our most imaginative neighbours, and the future could well hold some highly-coloured surprises in store. To be continued ... as we say.

Roger Gaillard



Fun and excitement against a Helvetian background (From «The Tournesol Affair», the adventures of Tintin).

Telegrams

■ Exhibitions

- Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne: *Clemente* (15/5 to 12/6)
- Musée de l'Hermitage, Lausanne: *Albert Marquet* (12/2 to 22/5)
- Museo Comunale Ascona: *Arthur Segal* (30/4 to 5/6)
- Kunstmuseum Winterthur: *Lucebert* (26/3 to 8/5)
- Kunstmuseum Zurich: *European Historical Painting from Rubens to Monet* (30/3 to 24/4)