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Swiss period furniture

Every time we, as children, visited Aunt Alice in the little village Villarzel above the Broye Valley we wondered why, in true Vaudois fashion, nobody really remembered any more just how we were related, and every time we stood around the bureau in her little sitting room on the first floor, admiring it with reverence. 150 years ago, a cabinet-maker in neighbouring Payerne had made it from the wood of two walnut trees from the family's orchard. An artistic locksmith from Moudon had supplied the metal fittings and the beautiful keys. The top cover came from the marble quarry of Saint-Triphon. It was a piece of Vaudois period furniture *par excellence*. If one pulled out the middle drawer of the lower part, a second drawer appeared behind, and if one pulled out that one, too, three secret compartments became visible. If one pressed on the inside right panel, an invisible flap dropped on the left, and if one pressed on the inside left panel, the same game happened on the right. If one shut the writing part, air escaped as if one had shut the door of a strong-room in a bank. "Yes, this is quality still", the aunt used to say, while stroking lovingly over the beautifully worked rhombs and lattice work in the dark and light wood of the outside. This alternation of two shades of the same kind of wood explains why two trees were used in the construction of the bureau. One of the trees had been planted immediately next to the manure heap and supplied the dark wood, whilst the usual golden brown shade came from the other tree. This most prosaic origin of the unusual colouring did not trouble anyone, for fortunately the corresponding smell had not been transferred to the wood! When the aunt died very old, all of

us wanted to inherit the bureau. In the end lots had to be drawn, and the unfortunate losers heard, not without malicious pleasure, that one of the furniture men missed the top step when the bureau was taken away: The beautiful piece of furniture as well as the three men carrying it, fell down the whole flight of stairs: Torn-off feet – fortunately, though sadly, on the bureau only – broken marble, bumps on furniture and men, bruises on inlaid patterns and on knees – that was the sad result. But as there are even today some master craftsmen in our country, the bureau was repaired in the most meticulous way, and soon it stood there resplendent in its whole beauty once more. Only its marble top is now Italian. We have taken the liberty to put this little story at the beginning of our report, because it shows just how much tradition plays its part in furniture in our country, too, how highly developed quality has become, and – in the origin of one of the walnut trees – how virtue was made of necessity, where other than much richer countries

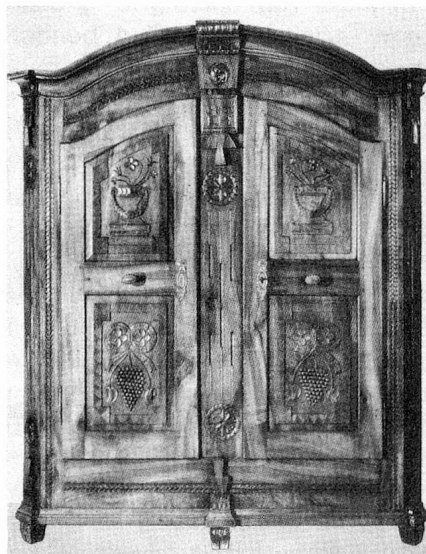
had used exotic woods to achieve similar contrasts in colouring.

Although Switzerland with its poor mountainous regions remained one of the poorest countries in Europe for a long time, furniture has always been well made and of great variety. From all directions, the different art movements penetrated our country: Via the Engadine came the influence from Italy, via Western Switzerland and Berne we felt the French taste, via Basle the notable influence of Dutch furniture development, and via North-Eastern Switzerland came the not inconsiderable and particular accent from Southern Germany and Austria. In the transmission of all these various influences, the early Swiss resident abroad, the numerous travelling merchants and the mercenaries in foreign service, played a decisive part.

On the other hand, anyone considering the use of foreign materials like rosewood, violetwood, etc. as the acme of cabinet-making, looking for inlaid tortoiseshell and semi-precious stones, or for gilt bronze decorations, will be disappointed. But anyone who loves neat workmanship, simple, but beautiful and timeless forms, will be delighted. Regardless of the fact that we, as a small country, have always been influenced by the cultures of the larger neighbouring nations, our furniture has developed its own independent and characteristic type.

By deliberately simplifying foreign models, we often achieved pieces of furniture in Switzerland, which are striking in their simplicity and clear lines. Nowhere does one find too many ornaments. As the Swiss as peasants or descendants of peasants have deliberately kept to tradition, it often happened that two or even three different styles were mixed in the same piece of

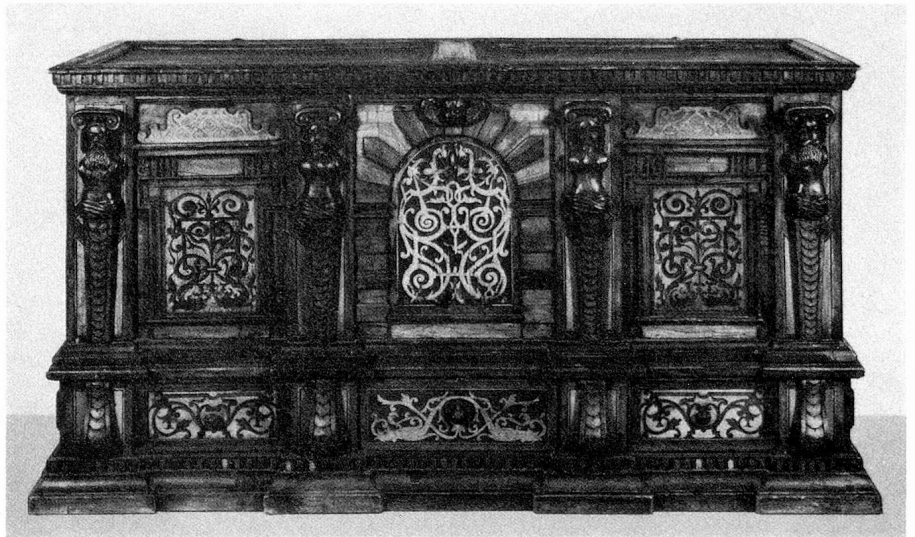
Wardrobe, 1830, Eastern Switzerland



furniture. Amongst pieces of which the Swiss have always been very fond, such as the chest, the dresser and the linen cupboard, the forms taken over from the Gothic and the Renaissance were combined with new period tendencies. Frequently, such new forms were used quite incorrectly, which often, though, produced rather charming special effects.

Our country is comparatively rich in Gothic and Renaissance furniture. It is not only in castles and museums that such examples are found. The reason for this is found in tradition, but also in the lack of money for new purchases in the past. A number of rural living rooms in Central Switzerland, in the Bernese Oberland, in the Valais and the Grisons have retained completely the character of that epoch. In fact, even today one can find cabinet-makers and wood-carvers in these regions who make furniture of that type with great skill and mastery: chairs and stools of all kinds, superb tables with slate tops, sideboards for pewter ware. Today, as always, mountain fir, Arolla pine and maple provide the wood. Instead of inlaid work, we often find painted decorations.

As in other European countries, the 18th and early 19th centuries are the most interesting as far as furniture is concerned. In Switzerland, Berne was leading and produced the most varied but also the most beautiful objects: arm-chairs and settees, card-tables, sewing-tables, writing-tables and above all chests of drawers. Matthaeus Funk (1697–1783) and his family achieved real works of art. Whilst in other Swiss towns, these chests of drawers remained "big-bellied", rustically clumsy or heavy and ostentatious, the Bernese chest of drawers developed into a most elegant product which would not have been ill-placed in the most elaborate Paris interiors of the time. This is even more



Chest, Renaissance style, Grisons.

remarkable as local wood was used in Switzerland almost exclusively, polished walnut, maple, cherry and pear for the inlaid work. The metal hinges and keyhole plates were unobtrusive, but of best quality. The top covers came from Grindelwald and were of pink-grey grained or grey-yellowish marble.

Zurich – which always showed a preference for tall furniture – together with Winterthur, had a special reputation for high tiled stoves. In Zurich they constructed without hesitation glass cupboards on top of chests of drawers, with perhaps even a writing compartment in between. On the other hand, the famous Zurich

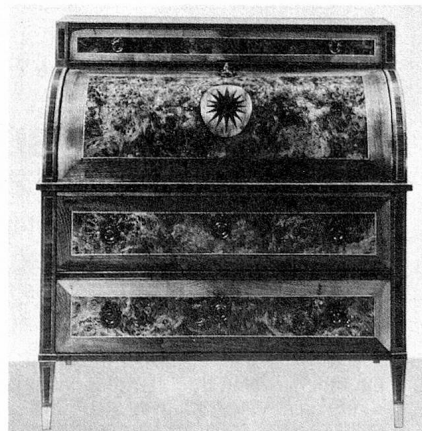
"Wellenschranke" were singularly beautiful: wardrobes of most generous lines, but pieces which only the most experienced craftsmen could produce in such perfection. As far as Basle is concerned, it seems that one was never quite ready to leave behind the 17th century with its Louis XIII furniture. Although furniture there, too, became lighter in line gradually, the Dutch/Rhenish influence was never lost completely.

In Western parts of Switzerland, Vaud and Fribourg followed Berne's example. Chairs and arm-chairs with plaited straw seats are particularly remarkable in the Canton of Vaud, whilst in Fribourg it is the wardrobes with beautiful inlaid work, mostly in a star pattern, which are outstanding.

Neuchâtel and Geneva which produced the most elegant town houses between 1700 and 1830, were surprisingly modest as far as the construction of furniture was concerned, probably because the rich families from those parts used to procure furniture and chattels almost exclusively from Paris and Lyons.

In the Ticino, too, the better-off families used to have their furnishings supplied from abroad (Upper Italy).

Secretaire, Louis XVI, Berne





Chest of drawers, Louis XV, Berne.

(Photos Galerie Stuker, Berne)

The style of Louis XVI which brought furniture to its highest perfection in France, never got off the ground properly in our country. As soon as it began to have some influence in Switzerland with the usual delay, the French Revolution broke out, and soon the French army invaded Switzerland – hardly a time to think of re-furnishing! Only in Western Switzerland do we find furniture from the end of the 18th century represented more particularly.

The style of the French *Empire*, whose main element seemed to consist of pomp and show, never became popular in our country. It is too much opposed to the Swiss democratic character and was identified with Napoleon I himself who oppressed Switzerland at the time.

The lack of the style of Louis XVI was compensated by *Biedermeier* furniture, a style derived from the Louis XVI period (about 1815 to 1840), but in more simple and homely form. Switzerland, next to Germany, contributed considerably to the development of this particular style. Again it was Berne which excelled with the famous

“Hopfengärtner” furniture. Together with Funk chests of drawers, the “Hopfengärtner” products reach absolute top prices on the antique market today. *Biedermeier* furniture became more and more simple due to the poor times, but it remained elegant in its form. Instead of inlaid work, the graining of the wood was used as decoration. A speciality was the so-called Yverdon furniture to which skilled cabinet-makers added ornaments made of hardened paper pulp varnished with a kind of liquid wood, a recipe which has been lost. One more

proof how Swiss craftsmen knew how to make a virtue of necessity. As the *Biedermeier* period died away (about 1840), a time of imitating old styles began also in the construction of furniture, New-Gothic, New-Renaissance, New-Baroque – a rather unhappy epoch as far as taste is concerned. In Switzerland generally, the sense of tradition and love of simplicity prevented the rather bombastic tendencies from becoming popular. The so-called *Jugendstil* (turn of the century) never prevailed in Switzerland; it was probably too decadent for the worthy Swiss! The 'thirties and 'forties of this century brought our country a rather happy revival of old rural furniture in the so-called *Heimatsstil*. Where the rustic note was not exaggerated too badly and lamps were made from spinning-wheels and feeding troughs were turned into bookcases, some most pleasing and acceptable solutions were found.

Of late, two new tendencies have become noticeable in Switzerland, on one hand the Scandinavian objective simplicity, and on the other, due to the widespread love of travelling, a kind of Spanish/Hollywood romanticism. And only just recently, a new Swiss style of furniture has appeared again, also rather functional and modern.

Marcel Ney

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