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The Bourbaki panorama

A symbol of international solidarity

On March 10 the people of Lucerne agreed to preserve the Bourbaki panorama and thus spared this valuable part of our cultural heritage for posterity.

In three days 88,000 asylum-seekers cross the Swiss border. Many are ill. All are accepted and given urgently needed care, regardless of their ethnic background, and, shared out amongst the various cantons. A call for donations

*Rea Brändle **

brings in Sfr. 15 million, much more in today's terms. This is not a Utopian dream. It actually happened – in winter 1871 during the last days of the Franco-Prussian war. In Paris a peace treaty was already being negotiated, but the French army of the east was still in the field. General Bourbaki, hemmed in by the Germans, had committed suicide. His army started to disintegrate and his troops fled in the direction of the Jura and the Swiss frontier.

Hodler as assistant

This memorable scene was immortalised by Edouard Castres. The successful Geneva painter, descended from Huguenots, had joined Bourbaki's troops as a volunteer. Some sources say that as a war painter, as it was then known, he accompanied the first Red Cross ambulance. In 1876 he was commissioned to paint a huge circular picture of the surrender of Bourbaki's army. This would be on a canvas 18,000 square metres big. He worked for two years on the memorial painting together with ten assistants. The young Ferdinand Hodler was one of these, as was the animal painter, Van Muyden. The stage designer, Henri Silvestre, was also employed as a specialist for the optical illusions at the lower edge of the picture.

In spite of this division of labour the master painter supervised the work as a whole. He brought to life those turbulent events from his memory. He bathed the countless individual scenes

The Bourbaki panorama is a unique witness to a historical event and a most valuable part of our cultural heritage.
(Photo: zvg)



in a cool winter light which he worked on in detailed studies in the Jura. He painted a snow landscape with distant horizons peopled by 10,000 figures, some of them life-size. They are so realistic that at first sight it is easy to forget how skilfully the work is composed.

The crowd scenes imperceptibly blend into each other, and it is only when you look at it in detail that you realise that there was sometimes an interval of several days between the events shown: endless columns of fleeing troops, their disarming by a Swiss regiment, the treaty with General Herzog, spontaneous help by the women of the surrounding villages, the Red Cross hospital, the huge convoys into the heart of Switzerland – all this appears to be happening simultaneously, with the visitor standing in the middle.

Authentic landscape

The picture itself has no centre. It tells in epic form of life and death, of dying soldiers, and horses gnawing at each other's tails out of sheer hunger. These miniature scenes of horror are portrayed in an authentic landscape: fields under snow, hamlets and isolated houses just like those you can still see around Les Verrières.

The Bourbaki panorama was inaugurated in Geneva in 1881, and eight years later it was taken to Lucerne, together with its rotunda, to be a tourist attrac-

tion. 60,000 entry tickets were sold in the first season, and this success continued until the First World War. In 1925 the rotunda was sold and converted into a garage. In fact the great circular picture continued to be accessible to the public in the upper storey, but the conversion badly damaged its effect, and it gradually slipped out of people's minds. It was only in the 1970s that the monument was rediscovered. It was slowly brought back to life with the aid of private funds until the City of Lucerne finally committed itself to long-term support.

A historic cultural rarity

In Europe such panoramas can be counted on the fingers of one hand. For this reason alone the Bourbaki painting is a historic cultural rarity and may even be considered as unique. In contrast to most war painters of the past, Castres did not glorify war. Looked at in this way his work may be seen as a symbol of that international solidarity which has become so rare in our times. This makes it all the more necessary to keep alive the memory of 1871 and to tell the story over and over again about how the refugees were brought from the frontier at Les Verrières right into the heart of the country. Not all returned to their homelands. Many died here, and in some country churchyards you can still find a memorial stone to the Bourbaki army.

* Rea Brändle is a freelance journalist.