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The Bourbaki Panorama has a new splendour

Edouard Castres' giant painting in the Lucerne Panorama had been neglected for many years. This piece of art was almost in a state of decay when it was finally declared a work of national importance at the end of the 1970s and placed under a cantonal and federal preservation order. Now, following its restoration, it has a new splendour again. By Heinz Eckert

In the early hours of 1 February 1871 and during the day that followed, a total of 8,7847 French soldiers, including 2,467 officers, with 11,000 horses, 11,150 transport carriages, 285 canons, 72,000 rifles and 46,000 bayonets crossed the Swiss border at four points in the Jura.

Around 33,500 soldiers arrived in the small town of Les Verrières alone, while a further 54,000 men entered Switzerland at Sainte-Croix, Jougne and Saint-Cergues in the Vaud Jura under freezing temperatures with heavy snow.

Poorly equipped and weakened by cold and hunger, the French Army of the East under General Bourbaki sought protection in Switzerland from their Prussian adversaries immediately after signing the border-crossing agreement close to the end of the Franco-Prussian War. The French had been faced with a choice – either to continue fighting or to surrender to the Prussians. So, Bourbaki's successor, General Clinchiant, sought refuge in Switzerland for his exhausted and sick soldiers. Switzerland therefore saved the French troops from futile carnage. Three thousand Swiss soldiers were called to the Jura to meet the humbled battalions.

Having been disarmed, the French were sent from Les Verrières without escort to Fleurier, where soldiers from Valais were waiting for them. Red Cross trains provided the transport. Never-ending columns of soldiers from Bourbaki's army poured into Switzerland for more than 48 hours.

The internees were distributed throughout all the cantons with the exception of Ticino. Edouard Castres was a well-known artist of the day from Geneva who gave up his studio at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War to register as a helper with the French Red Cross. Castres was with Bourbaki's army when it was forced into Switzerland and had witnessed the misery of war. Deeply affected by the atrocities of the con-



The Panorama cultural centre.

flict, Edouard Castres returned to Paris after the war where he expressed his experiences through his art. Shortly afterwards, Castres was commissioned by a Belgian panorama company to produce a circular painting of the capitulation of Bourbaki's soldiers in the Swiss Jura.

In 1881, with the help of a group of outstanding artists – Ferdinand Hodler among them – Castres completed the circular painting, which was 14 metres in height with a circumference of 112 metres. The panorama was unveiled in Geneva on 24 September 1881.

The Bourbaki Panorama was exhibited in Geneva for eight years, from 1881 to 1889.



The arrival of Bourbaki's defeated army in Les Verrières: Edouard Castres' painting is an historical work of art of

national and international importance.



Wartime drama: details provided by the Bourbaki circular painting.



The canvas had also started to come apart over the course of time, with holes appearing in it.

In 1979, an "Association for the Preservation of the Bourbaki Panorama" was set up, which succeeded in raising public awareness of the "unique historical document". With a non-reimbursable contribution of a million Swiss francs from the city of Lucerne and an interest-free loan of a further million, the association was able to purchase the property and arrange for a rudimentary restoration of the circular painting.

In 1991, it was assumed that the painting could be taken down for restoration. However, its condition at the time made this impossible, ruling out a change of location. National and international experts also advocated the preservation of rotundas and circular paintings in their entirety.

After ambitious plans to reconstruct the panorama building with a view to making Castres' painting the centrepiece of a new art museum were abandoned in 1991 owing to a lack of funding, a new solution emerged in 1994. The Lucerne city library housing the main office of the library association – for which a new location had been sought for some time – would get a new home in the completely renovated panorama building together with the panorama painting, a small panorama museum and the "panorama culture" rooms previously put to other uses. Lucerne would get a new cultural centre for CHF 20 million, which should be self-financing, meaning running costs would have to be met by rental income from the space on the ground floor.

The Lucerne electorate approved a CHF 14 million loan, while the remaining CHF 6 million was provided by patrons. The building was completely renovated and the painting restored between 1996 and 2004. The forecourt was also completed at the beginning of March this year, when the new panorama was officially inaugurated.