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Hans Erni – an artist celebrates his 100th birthday

A painter, graphic artist and sculptor, Hans Erni is one of Switzerland's most interesting and diverse artists of international standing. He has produced thousands of works over a period of 80 years. Hans Erni celebrated his 100th birthday in February this year. By Viviane Aerni



Hans Erni was born in Lucerne on 21 February 1909, the son of a ship's engineer and amateur painter and a farmer's daughter. He grew up on the banks of Lake Lucerne with seven brothers and sisters. Hans Erni entered working life as an apprentice land surveyor. He immediately followed this with a second apprenticeship as a draughtsman. It was during this second period of training that he first discovered art literature, which inspired him to begin a course at art college in Lucerne in 1927.

In the 1930s, the young Erni travelled back and forth between Paris and Lucerne, and during this period of his life came to

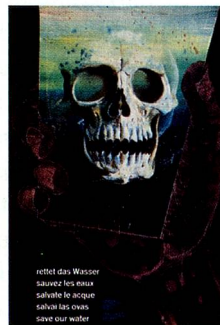
learn about and appreciate contemporary French art. He was particularly impressed and inspired by Picasso and Braque. Hans Erni was at the forefront in the emergence of abstract art in Paris. The artist developed his main motifs, style and dialectic method during this period. Hans Erni became a public figure in 1939. He displayed his 100-by-5-metre mural entitled "Switzerland, the people's holiday destination" at the Swiss national exhibition. This work represented a major turning point in his art. The mural is today owned by the National Museum in Zurich.

However, the artist had to fight for recognition for many years. He was shunned in many circles because he was rumoured to have communist beliefs. In 1951, he was even prohibited from taking part in the Biennale in São Paulo by the then Federal Councillor Etter.

Erni's artistic work is remarkably diverse. He has produced many lithographs, around 300 posters and various murals. He has illustrated some 200 specialist books, encyclopaedias and literary works. He has also designed around 90 stamps and

25 medals, and made sculptures and carpets. Switching between commissioned and un-commissioned work is characteristic of Erni. His art is influenced by philosophical, social and political themes. For example, he has also produced images for electoral campaigns, such as the introduction of old age and survivors' insurance and the right to vote for women. Yet Erni has also found inspiration in fields such as technology, science, sport, nature and music, and incorporated them into his works. These days, it is mainly social and environmental topics that are reflected in his art. Erni's favourite motifs include the dove of peace and nudes. He also paints a self-portrait every year, which he gives to his wife Doris.

Even at the age of 100, Hans Erni is full of energy and inspiration. He still plans and carries out new projects with great gusto. He unveiled his latest work – a gigantic ceramic mural which represents the fight for peace and now adorns the entrance to the Palais des Nations – at the beginning of June at the UN headquarters in Geneva. It is 37 years since Erni's works were last displayed in a public museum. The Museum of



Art in Lucerne is now paying tribute to the artist with a retrospective to mark his 100th birthday. The exhibition will run until 4 October 2009.

Even though his work and political leanings are always the subject of controversy, Hans Erni is today one of Switzerland's best known artists and public figures. This was recognised at the beginning of the year when he received the Swiss Lifetime Award.



Hans Erni's portfolio is immense. The most well-known are his posters (centre) and his giant mural for the 1939 national exhibition (section below). He's paints a self-portrait every year for his wife (top).