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Switzerland as seen by the travellers of bygone ages

The popularity of the mountains owes much to the passion that travelling romantics, writers and artists, had for Switzerland. The "Viatimages" database contains more than 2,000 pictures illustrating accounts of journeys in Switzerland and the Alps from the Renaissance to the 19th century. An interview with Claude Reichler, professor at the University of Lausanne and head of the project.

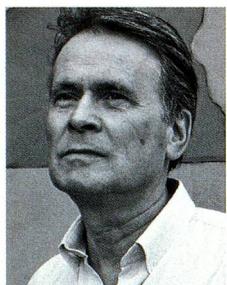
By Alain Wey

The "Viaticalpes" project with its thousands of images of Switzerland in bygone days invites us to discover the early stages of tourism in Switzerland and the forgotten history of our mountains. The travelogues reveal foreigners' fascination with Switzerland since the 18th century. The wealth of images that illustrate them have been stored in the "Viatimages" online database. This infatuation with the Alps contributed to the aura of the alpine region that has become part of Swiss mythology.

Claude Reichler, head of the project and professor of French literature and cultural history at the University of Lausanne, takes a journey back in time through the soaring enthusiasm generated by our "unspoiled island", which is richly illustrated in pictorial and literary works. The remarkable appeal of the high mountains, where the Alpine Arc can be traversed or crossed, has transformed the sphere of leisure activities from the time of the Renaissance.

"SWISS REVIEW": How did alpine travel become fashionable?

PROFESSOR CLAUDE REICHLER: There are various reasons but a key factor is the tradition among young English aristocrats of making an educational journey around Europe known as the "Grand Tour". In 18th-century England a new way of looking at nature emerged, which spawned an aesthetic ideal known as picturesque. Great significance was attributed to unspoiled nature. At first, the flatlands, parks and gardens were all the rage. Then all of a sudden, adventure and vertical ascents took centre stage. This interest spread from the UK to all European cultures, to the French and German, then to the Nordic cultures with the Romantic Movement.



Was this infatuation with the Swiss alpine region also linked to political thought?

The philosophers and thinkers of 18th-century Europe saw models of fundamental democracy in the small alpine cantons with their local assemblies. These places and the peasants who lived there were seen as heralding a new form of politics and popular freedom that contrasted with the monarchical Europe of the time.

Which literary works marked this shift towards idealisation of the alpine landscape and unspoiled nature?

Two fundamentally important works played a major role: the poem "The Alps" (1732) by Albrecht von Haller and "Julie, or the New Heloise" (1761) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. They were read by all the European elites and possessed the quality of masterpieces that transform the thinking of the time.

And what about authors in the rest of Europe?

There was great interest in the Alps, particularly the Swiss Alps, in all European cultures. The great romantics came to Switzerland and wrote alpine works. The English with George Gordon Byron, William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, the Germans with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Hölderlin, and the French with Alexandre Dumas, the author of the "Three Musketeers", Victor Hugo and George Sand.

The "Viatimages" project is based on accounts of alpine journeys. How significant is this literary trend?

According to the British historian Gavin de Beer, around five books on Switzerland

were published every year in Europe in the second half of the 18th century. After the Napoleonic Wars, from 1815 until 1850, 40 works on travels in Switzerland sometimes appeared in one year. This represented an extraordinary success for the period.

What types of images appeared in these travelogues, which were very often illustrated?

They were often engravings, which were later coloured, transforming watercolour engravings into a popular craft. Artists also sold miniature watercolour pictures to wealthy travellers. These schools depicting the Alps were called "the small Swiss masters". The most important of them was Caspar Wolf. He worked outdoors and in his studio in winter. He also produced larger-sized oil paintings. In the 19th century, painters turned depicting the Alps into a profession, among them Alexandre Calame (1810-1864) from Geneva, who enjoyed enormous success. His paintings were commissioned by the Russian court. In the 19th century, the Geneva landscape school was fond of portraying the Alps. This continued until Ferdinand Hodler, who devoted a lot of time to landscapes.

What developments can be identified in the illustrations over the centuries?

There were different fashions and sensibilities over the ages. A distinction can be made, for example, between the picturesque style of the 18th century – which depicts scenes from rural life in the valleys – and the style associated with the sublime nature of the very high mountains, with their glaciers, rocks, precipices and great waterfalls, which characterised the 19th century.

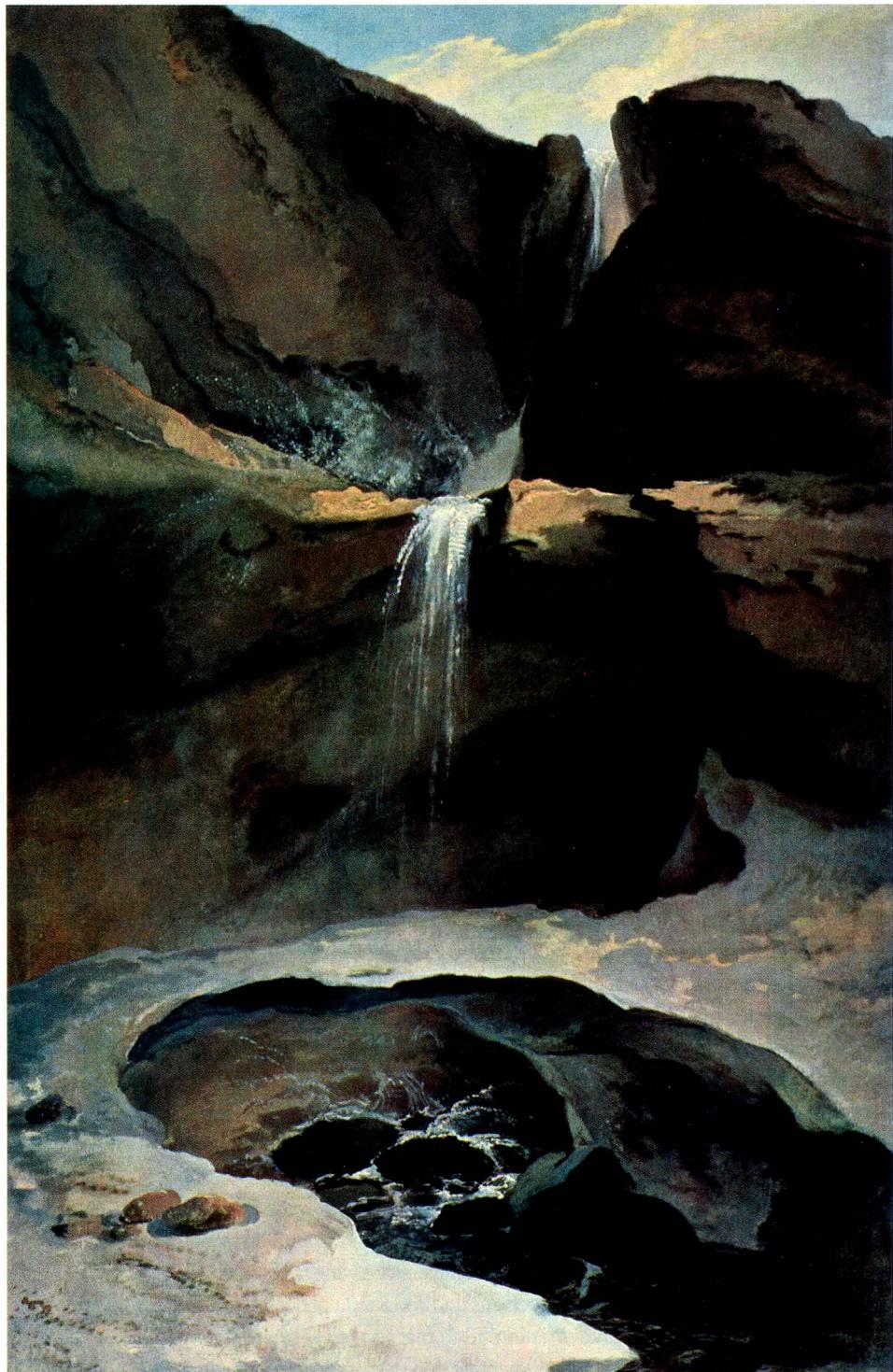
How did the passion for travel in Switzerland develop?

In the 18th century, these travellers were the European urban elite from London,

Paris and German cities as well as philosophers, painters and aristocrats. After the Napoleonic Wars, Europeans started to travel again and businessmen and merchants gradually joined the movement. They copied the behaviour of the aristocrats because it enhanced their status. The number of travellers increased when the transport revolution (steam trains and boats) got underway. Preindustrial forms of tourist accommodation were developed with the construction of large hotels on the shores of the lakes and even in the Alps. This was the beginning of tourism, with the English travel agency Cook offering the first organised trips around 1860. The popularity of the Alps was also boosted in the 19th century by doctors treating tuberculosis who advocated the quality of the pure alpine air and the benefits of the sun.

What do you mean by "unspoiled island" in relation to Switzerland?

This is a major Swiss theme that is often covered by the press. It dates back to the 18th century when Switzerland made a name for itself outside historical trends with travellers who came here to see models of democracy at work. They saw these as a relic that had survived since time immemorial, but this was an error of judgement. The concept of unspoiled island was not invented by the Swiss but by people from elsewhere. The Swiss subsequently adopted it partly to justify their neutrality.



"Der Geltenbachfall im Winter" by Caspar Wolf (1735-1783).

Wolf was a pioneer of the painting of alpine scenery. Under a commission from

the Bernese publisher Abraham Wagner, he produced his magnum opus –

a gallery with almost 200 oil paintings of the Swiss Alps.

THE "VIATIMAGES" DATABASE

A comprehensive encyclopaedia of travel writing in the Swiss Alps, "Viatimages" is a database containing over 2,000 illustrations from travel literature on the Alps dating from the 16th to the 19th century. Claude Reichler and the "Viatimages" project team have reviewed over 10,000 iconographies.

phies from 800 little-known books which are often confined to library archives.

These illustrations also provide depictions of clothing, people, minerals, plant life, plans, maps, monuments and scenery.

All the illustrations on the "Viatimages" website are linked

with the corresponding texts (in French, German, English and Latin), artists, engravers and authors (with biographies). The most enjoyable feature is geographical research. An interactive map enables images, which can be enlarged with a zoom function, to be localised. Those

who appreciate detail will enjoy this because they contain small scenes that allow you to explore the customs of the day, encapsulating the enthusiasm of travellers for alpine landscapes.
