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Borders – a story of jeopardy and opportunity

If a museum is devoted ostensibly to what seems a very niche, limited subject, how does it retain its appeal for decades? Take the Bourbaki Panorama in Lucerne, for example – a museum with architecture and artifacts that hark back to a single event: the winter crossing into Switzerland of 87,000 ragged, frozen, hungry French soldiers led by com-

mander General Bourbaki in 1871. The subsequent intake, disarmament and internment of Bourbaki's demoralised refugee army played an important role in cementing humanitarianism and neutrality in Switzerland's national psyche. This story, which proved to be a remarkable experience for the entire Swiss nation, was depicted on an iconic 112-metre-long circular painting by Edouard Castres that now dominates the museum. Panoramic depictions like Castres'



still-captivating work are seen as the precursor of cinema. Instead of glorifying the suffering, the painting remains an outstanding piece of art and a blunt indictment of war. During the current year of remembrance to mark 150 years since the event, the museum not only looks back at the suffering as well as the solidarity with which Switzerland responded to this wave of refugees. It also encourages us to reflect on the borderlines and borderline experiences of the present day,

offering an inquisitive and provocative take on the world of boundaries, borders and limits – from our own human limitations, to contemporary border crossings and the modern-day refugees whose dreams these borders crush. Clearly, borders are a story of jeopardy and opportunity. The museum gets this message across not through paintings as Castres once did, but through a mixture of multicultural features, picture clues, podium discussions, and thematic guided

tours. A century and a half later, the Bourbaki Panorama pushes its own boundaries as a visitor attraction. MUL

Year of remembrance at the Bourbaki Panorama
Special exhibition accompanied by a wide range of guided tours and events; until 31 December 2022
www.bourbakipanorama.ch