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Snippets and News from Switzerland



Trio of antique robots lure visitors to Neuchâtel

Neuchâtel has made a name for itself as the home of the world's first known robots, dating back to the 1700s.

After a minute-long ride on Neuchâtel's funicular linking the station in the hills to the city by the lake, I walk past the site of the Expo.02 "Arteplage" - a floating platform that is one of the stages for Switzerland's national exhibition.

I am accompanied by the constant shriek of seagulls until I get to the Art and History Museum, which is the home of the first family of robots - the Jaquet-Droz androids.

It is an essential stop for any visitor to Expo.02 in Neuchâtel, in order to compare the show called "Robotics", which could prove to be one of Expo's main attractions, with the 18th century androids.

Artist, Writer and Musician

The three automated figures - the Artist, the Writer and the Musician - built between 1768 and 1774, by the clock maker, Pierre Jaquet-Droz and his son, are the most perfectly preserved in the world. Jaquet-Droz was also responsible for creating one of the first artificial arms ever in Europe.

The automata are brought to life - literally by being wound up - on the first Sunday of every month. For the rest of the time, they are encased in glass boxes in a cold, dark room. The Writer and the Artist are two life-sized figures of boys, seated at desks. The internal structures of both automata comprise intricate brass wind-up mechanisms - around 4,000 pieces within the body of each of the automata. On close inspection, it was hard not to ask if the hair and paint on the figures were actually authentic. The watchmaker in charge of the demonstration told me that the original hair and some the clothing had been replaced over the past two centuries. He added that it takes at least two technicians up to four hours to programme each automaton to carry

out specific tasks.

When the rear metal casing of the Artist's body was removed, it was easy to see why its internal wheel of 40 different kinds of lettering - similar to the one in old-fashioned typewriters - required so much work in advance.

article by swissinfo.

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Chocolate industry fights child labour

Swiss companies have joined the global chocolate industry in putting the finishing touches to an agreement to stamp out child labour.

Switzerland, a major chocolate producer, has joined other nations investigating measures to address the use of children in West Africa's cocoa fields. The Swiss import nearly 50 per cent of their cocoa from two of the world's biggest cocoa producers, the Ivory Coast and Ghana. Chocosuisse, the association of Swiss chocolate manufacturers, says the industry has to become more socially responsible about who its suppliers are if the new protocol is to have an impact.

"One of the aims of the accord is to create a system that traces cocoa beans from the farm to the factory, and to see who is earning money from this trade," said Franz Schmid, the association's director. "That way you can exclude unwanted sources." Monitoring labour practices is extremely difficult though, as many

large farms are located in remote areas run by families or small businesses. "The chocolate production chain is very complex, and tracing the origins of cocoa is very difficult," Schmid told swissinfo.

Chocolate manufacturers themselves have been blamed for creating the market conditions that helped push African cocoa farmers into poverty, making them resort to child slave labour, according to Chocosuisse's director.

Education's role

"The slavery we see in these countries is the result of poverty. We should look for solutions so that every family can send their children to school a few hours per day." One suggested approach to resolving poverty is guaranteeing minimal incomes for cocoa farmers. "If we want to eradicate poverty, we have to change the income situation," said Schmid.

Swiss wrap up Salinas inquiry

A Geneva judge has wrapped up a probe into money laundering allegations against Raul Salinas, the brother of former Mexican president Carlos Salinas.

Swisscom operating profit slips

Swisscom says first quarter operating profit slipped by 3.1 per cent compared with last year to SFr1.168 billion (\$730 million).

Swiss fear exodus of best scientific brains

Switzerland fears the US is wooing away its top researchers. A decision by Swiss pharmaceutical giant, Novartis, to make the Boston area its new global research hub has sent shock waves through Switzerland.

Swiss threaten tax deal - with EU

The European Union has accused Switzerland of jeopardising a continent-wide deal on taxation, following the collapse of talks involving banking secrecy.

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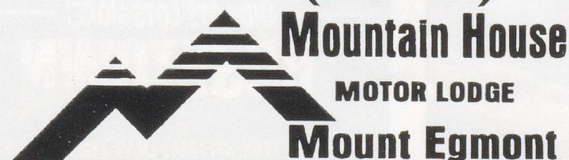
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