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# Neuchâtel's Musée d'Art et d'Histoire

The star attractions of this museum are the three mechanical figurines built to the most exacting technical standards by a Neuchâtelois watchmaker in the 1770s and still in perfect working order today. The three - the Draughtsman, the Writer and the Musician - are displayed static behind glass, with a fascinating accompanying slide-show in English by way of explanation, but if you can you should really time your visit for the first Sunday of the month, when they are brought to life for a demonstration. The Draughtsman is a child sitting at a mahogany desk and holding a piece of paper with his left hand; his right hand, holding a pencil, performs extraordinarily complex motions to produce intricate little



The draughtsman, the writer and the musician by Pierre Jaquet-Droz

pictures of a dog, the god Eros in a chariot pulled by a butterfly, or a noble profile of Louis XV. The Writer, a chubby-cheeked little boy, also sits at a mahogany desk, with a goose quill in his right hand and a tiny pot of ink nearby for dipping. He writes in a florid and chunky style, and staggeringly enough, can even be programmed to produce any text of up to forty characters. While he writes, his eyes follow the words across the page. But perhaps the most charming of the three is the Musician, a gracious young girl with slender and dextrous fingers who plays a small organ - a real instrument, not a disguised music box. As her fingers strike the keys to produce the notes and her eyes, head and body move subtly from side to side in time, her chest rises and falls delicately in an imitation of rhythmic breathing. Her melodies were composed in the early 1770s by Henri-Louis Jaquet-Droz, a fleeting and unique auditory time capsule from pre-Revolutionary Europe.

Pierre Jaquet-Droz (1721-90) was born in La Chaux-de-Fonds into a wealthy local family. After studying theology at university, he returned to Neuchâtel - by then already a centre for clock and

watchmaking - and worked to combine his interest in mathematics with the skills of applied mechanics used by the artisans of the watch industry. By the age of 26, Jaquet-Droz had gained a reputation for technical brilliance, and in 1758 he and his father-in-law, a craftsman named Abram Sandoz, travelled to Madrid to show off the skill of Neuchâtelois clockmakers at the Spanish court; Jaquet-Droz's so-called "Shepherd's Clock" is still on display in one of the King of Spain's palace museums.

Jaquet-Droz was by now wealthy enough to retreat from business life and concentrate on problems of applied mathematics, exemplified in his construction of incredibly complex mechanical figurines - the earliest of computers - designed to do particular tasks. He trained his son, Henri-Louis, and a colleague, Jean-Frédéric Leschot, to work with him; together, they produced the Writer, the Draughtsman and the Musician, and presented all three for the first time to the public in La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1774.

*from the internet*

## La Brévine

La Brévine is a village in the district of Le Locle in the canton of Neuchâtel. The area is ideal for cross-country skiing and hiking.

The village's microclimate is often much colder than other nearby locations. On 12 January, 1987, the local weather station recorded a temperature of -41.8°C, the coldest ever recorded in Switzerland. This has earned it the nickname *Little Siberia*.



La Brévine, the coldest place in Switzerland

The village makes the most of it, however, promising the visitor who is willing to brave the cold a warm welcome. The Hotel Le Loup Blanc promises quiet rooms and quiet surroundings. I'm not so sure about the White Wolf, though...