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Unesco Swiss World Heritage Sites

La Chaux-de-Fonds and Le Locle

La Chaux-de-Fonds and Le Locle represent a time capsule of Swiss watch making and its emergence from an artisan craft into a modern and mature industry.

Human settlement of the high Jura plateau was relatively late. The name of Le Locle, a small mountain village, does not appear until the Late Middle Ages and that of the hamlet of La Chaux-de-Fonds not until even later. However, the two autonomous rural communities existed by the mid-17th century. The birth of watchmaking at Le Locle is attributed to the semi-legendary figure of Daniel Jean-Richard at the end of the 17th century and other remarkable entrepreneurs of the 18th century.

Early division of labour

The production of watches required many different craft specialities. These were divided between a growing number of rural workers who specialised in the making of just one particular part. These parts were then brought together by an "Establisieur" who assembled the basic movement of the watch in his dedicated workshop. Through this early division of labour, a production chain for watches evolved and the necessary labour force could be trained rapidly.

In the 18th century, upper Jura farming families were well adapted to this secondary source of income. All that was required was a room, light and time, which was plentiful during winter.

The establisage system during this time was concentrated in the towns of Le Locle and La Chaux-de-Fonds. They were close to each other and became increasingly sophisticated to meet the growing demand for watches.

Homeworkers 90% of labour force

Eventually, town houses dedicated to watchmaking took over from the farm. With two or three storeys and an architecture that was sober and functional, these houses accommodated several families of worker-craftsmen and their workshops. They evolved into the vast colonies of home workers. In the second half of the 19th century, they comprised 90% of the Swiss watchmaking labour force.

A new urban design

The fire of 1794 in La Chaux-de-Fonds and the fires in Le Locle in 1833 and 1844 were very destructive. Seen as an opportunity, the towns were redesigned in a more rational way to suit the watchmaking industry. The new town planning scheme resulted in a grid of parallel roads and building blocks, where residential houses and workshops intermingled to suit the needs of the local watchmaking industry. This gave rise to the "mono-industrial" manufacturing towns which are well preserved and active today. It enabled further transition from craft manufacturing to more industrialised production.

The Industrial Revolution led to the building of a railway line between the two towns in 1857, subsequently extended to Neuchâtel. The railway fitted well with the strip-based urban fabric and strengthened urban activities. Soon, a water supply and sewerage system was constructed: Hygienic concerns were given priority. At this time, the town of La Chaux-de-Fonds was described by Karl Marx as a huge factory town in his book "Das Kapital", where he analysed the division of labour in the watchmaking industry of the Jura.



La Chaux-de-Fonds: Precision lay-out to meet the demands of industry
©Tourisme neuchâtelois



Art Nouveau features in buildings in La Chaux-de-Fonds
©Tourisme neuchâtelois

Meeting modern challenges

Nothing lasts forever. The second half of the 19th century brought serious challenges to the region's watchmakers: A growing need for increased output and quality at a lower cost.

A new American watch manufacturing business model posed new threats. This was based on fully interchangeable standardised parts and sophisticated machine tools.

The watchmaking industry of the Jura mountains was the first in Europe to adapt to this new model, leading to the creation of integrated factories and larger workshops. Thus, the Swiss watchmaking industry managed to maintain and strengthen its competitiveness, to once again dominate the world watch market.

The crisis of the 1930s also left its mark on the region. However, the Swiss watchmaking industry coped, thanks to a publicly controlled cartel system.

Another industry shock occurred in the 1970s with the arrival of quartz crystal watches and novel electronic technology from foreign countries. This led to another drastic and rapid conversion of the industry which once again raised Swiss watchmaking to the position of unrivalled market leader.

But not all is industry: Today, both La Chaux-de-Fonds and Le Locle boast beautiful buildings, museums and unique examples of Art Nouveau.

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