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Autor: [s.n.]
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Swiss New Year's Traditions

Silvesterkläuse in Urnäsch

The tradition of the Urnäsch Silvesterkläuse (Appenzell Ausserrhoden), a custom over 200 years old, has developed from simple begging in disguise into an expression of creative handy work. Today, the Kläuse wear robes and masks which require a great deal of time and effort to make.

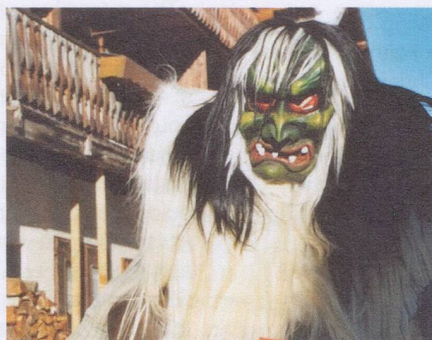
Three very different groups must be distinguished: the Schöne (beautiful), of whom more will be said, the Wüeschte (ugly), who wear natural disguises in the form of pine branches, moss, and frightening masks, and the Schö-Wüeschte (less ugly), who use the same materials for their disguise as the "ugly ones" but look less so.



In the evening, most of them meet in small groups and proceed from house to house. Singing and ringing their bells, they wish the families a prosperous year. They receive small gifts of money which help to cover the cost of the costumes and refreshments. The headdresses of the "beautiful" Kläuse are richly decorated and sometimes take as long as 100 or more hours to make: the Wiiber, or women, wear high, fancy bonnets with figures, while the Mannevölcher, or men, carry carved and painted scenes of rural life depicted on flat boards. Actually all the costumes disguise men, as the carrying of bells is a very strenuous job. The "women" wear a belt which normally has thirteen bells attached; the "men" carry a large bell on both chest and back.

The event takes place in similar form on two separate days, New Year's Eve and January 13. When Pope Gregory XIII introduced his new calendar reform, some Reformed cantons wanted nothing to do with this new regulation and continued to use the old calendar up until the eighteenth century hence the difference of 13 days. In some rural areas, both the old and new calendars were printed side by side, and so the Kläuse appear on both days.

Tschäggättä in Lötschental



From 3 February to Ash Wednesday masked "Tschäggättä" parade through the villages of the Lötschental in the canton of Valais. These masked figures get their name from the black and white colour of the goat or sheep skin tunics that they traditionally wear ("tschäggättä" means 'irregular patches of two colours' in the local dialect).

The tradition was originally a courtship ritual practiced only by the local bachelors. Times have changed and now anyone can join in. For the deeply religious inhabitants of the Lötschen valley, these distinctive and somewhat demonic-looking masks represented anarchy, rebellion and chaos.

The masques are handmade of Arvenholz - a local pine-related conifer easy to work with - by local carvers. Then they are painted and adorned with all kinds of material that give them an even wilder appearance: large cow teeth and horns, wacky hairdos of long goat hair - the weirder the better. The cushioned shoulders are covered by goat and sheep skin, and pants made of burlap potato sacks are held together with a large belt from which a cowbell dangles. Often, feet are wrapped in coarse fabric so masques can't be tracked down by their shoe soles. Colourful mittens knitted of "Triäm", leftover yarn from weaving, are especially helpful in the custom of soot throwing.

<http://www.lebendige-traditionen.ch>

Pelzmartiga in Kandersteg

On Christmas day and New Years day the "Pelzmartiga" roam through the streets from noon until late in the evening. They gain access to hotels and restaurants and their antics often frighten both children and adults.

The Pelzmartiga are made up of the following characters:

- The Chindlfrässer (Child Eater) wears a mask with a gaping mouth and menacing teeth. He carries a backpack with legs dangling out of it. The legs belong to a child that has fallen victim to him. The Chindlfrässer scares away famine and disease which, until the last century, caused the deaths of many young children
- The Chriismarti is dressed in evergreen branches and symbolizes the many dangers presented to men by winter in the woods.
- The Blätzlibueb wears a gown of sheer fabric scraps to scare away poverty.
- The Huttefroueli looks like an old woman carrying a war-torn soldier in a basket on her back. She scares away the threat of war.
- The Spielkartenmann, covered all over with playing cards scares away desires to gamble and imprudent spending.
- The Burli, a simple villager with pipe and nightcap.
- The Lyrimaa plays a hurdy-gurdy instrument. You can throw money into its money slot to buy your freedom from evil powers.
- The Heri, a gentleman in a tuxedo, hat, and white gloves holds a whip which he uses to keep the wild gang together and disciplines them if they become too violent.



Christmas is forever,
not for just one day,
for loving, sharing, giving,
are not to put away
like bells and lights and tinsel,
in some box upon a shelf.
The good you do for others is
good you do yourself.

Written by Norman W. Brooks