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Highlights

- Life Story Merchant Seaman
- The Art of making Birnenbrot
- Sleigh Parade Fideris
- Turnip Festival

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Urnäsch Sylvesterkläuse

December 31 and January 13

Photo © Tourismus Appenzellerland

The tradition of the Urnäsch Silvesterkläuse, a custom over 200 years old, has developed from simple begging in disguise into an expression of creative handwork. It is assumed that the festival does not have pagan origins, but goes back to a late medieval Advent tradition involving students of a monastic school.

In the 15th Century, with the celebrations becoming increasingly wild and carnival-like, the Catholic Church must have found that such behaviour hardly befitted the Advent season, which in turn may explain why the custom was transferred from the Advent season to New Year's Eve.

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 appeared on both days.

source: www.myswitzerland.com