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Romanesque Churches in Switzerland

At no time has Switzerland been famous for rich art treasures. With very few exceptions, there are neither important medieval cathedrals, nor castles and town halls. There are practically no Renaissance riches. At that epoch, Switzerland was far too poor and torn by interior disorders to produce significant works of art. The same can be said for the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

If we consider the Romanesque churches in Switzerland worthy of special mention, it is less for their size or their embellishments, but more for their picturesque positions in the Swiss mountainside and their expression of humility which corresponds to the deep and simple, almost naïve faith held at the period of erection. This is evident above all in the smaller places of worship. Thus in this essay we deliberately leave aside the few larger Romanesque church buildings such as the Fraumünster in Zurich, the Abbey at Payerne and the Cathedrals in Basle and Schaffhausen and shall concentrate on the modest churches providing such expressive evidence of true veneration.

In the construction of these churches, local stone was used and mostly slates to cover the roofs. The same simplicity is also found inside. There are no marble sculptures or mosaics on gold as one finds in Italy of the same era. One might possibly find some frescoes, but even these are of touching primordiality, even awkwardness.

In order to facilitate a visit to these churches, we have compiled a plan for a circular tour. This should lead the lovers of the arts amongst our readers to the most interesting small Romanesque churches and chapels.

Western Switzerland

Let us begin the trip in the Jura, coming from Basle. It is well worth making a small detour by the fine route of Les Rangiers to *St. Ursanne*. In this townlet, cradled in the narrow valley of the Doubs, we shall discover a beautiful Romanesque collegiate church of the twelfth century. There are impressive cloisters and the remains of a monastery erected on the tomb of St. Ursicinus. Church and cloisters have recently been renovated with great ability and discretion. The South door alone deserves at least two stars in any art guide. It shows remains of the original bright colouring.

Travelling along the vineyards on the shores of the lakes of Bienne and Neuchâtel, we find a Romanesque church tower at Twann, a fine Romanesque chancel in the collegiate church in Neuchâtel, a fine portal, the only remains of a Cluniasian monastery, at Bevaix. The first wholly preserved Romanesque church, however, we find again at *Grandson*, the old townlet known from the Burgundian Wars. Small though it is, the old monastery church of St. Jean is widely and rightly known for its capitals. Pillars and arches are as elegant as sculptures and ornaments are naïve and

awkward, a combination not without charm. In addition, the whole interior is plunged in a mystic semi-darkness.

In the Vaudois Jura we find quite a few Romanesque churches: Bretonnières, Bavois, Cossonay and others, partly reconstructed at a later date, as well as the most famous of all: *Romainmôtier*, perfectly situated in a wooded valley. The porch and the beautiful chancel pulpit are justifiably famous. In spite of the considerable art treasures within the church, it has not become a museum, but has remained a place of worship in daily life. On the shores of the Lake of Geneva, not far from Lausanne, the aged monastery church of *St. Sulpice* has its reflection on the water. Unfortunately, the nave collapsed in the fifteenth century, so all that remains is the intersection on which a rather squat watchtower was put up, and three semi-circular apses.

Unfortunately the Basilica of *St. Maurice* which must have been one of the largest early church buildings of Switzerland, was moved to a safer place in the seventeenth century, for it was threatened again and again by falling rocks from the stone walls in the narrow valley. A few remains of the walls and the imposing tower is all that remains of the old place of worship. The importance of the old church is shown above all in the church treasures which contain some valuables of European repute, amongst them the gold jug of Charles the Great. It is covered in oriental enamel work and is considered the most precious piece of art of Romanesque times.

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