Download PDF: 10.12.2025

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Trademark photography

Swiss publicity photographers have been shaping the nation's tourism image for a century. With camera and tripod they scour the land for unique scenes, treading the fine line between art and marketing to ensure that the message clicks with the customer.

Marketing a country has always been a multimedia undertaking, and photography still plays a leading role. The teams promoting Switzerland know that images speak volumes and can be used in any number of ways. They also demonstrate a smart touch when it comes to selecting artists – and the technical know-how involved in producing the images.

Stars in the making

Advertising gives young, undiscovered talents the chance to showcase their abilities. Such artists include Herbert Matter, former pupil of the Engelberg Abbey School. This gifted Swiss photographer had barely completed his studies in Geneva and Paris when he was drawn back to his homeland. And he didn't have to wait long to receive his first commissions, to shoot a poster series promoting motor tourism. For Matter it was obvious: this new trend demanded a bold new approach. He turned to photo montage. This introduced a new aesthetic into tourism advertising, and Matter became the pioneer of modern photographic posters. The campaign was picture perfect – and his SNTO series is now included in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

Masterful use of photography became the trademark of Swiss national advertising. The work of Philipp Giegel (1927–1997) left a particularly strong impression; his imagery wrote the history of the Tourism Office for half a century. Frenchman Yann-Arthus Bertrand, director of the blockbuster "HOME", is another pioneer: in 2014 he captured 360-degree views of "Switzerland from the air" for the summer campaign. His 20-minute film of the same name went around the world, enchanting passengers on board all SWISS long-haul flights.

Swissair was founded – and was later to become a key SNTO partner in advertising Switzerland.

Beginning of "radio propaganda". Paid advertising was banned, and the reach of Swiss radio stations was comparatively small. The SNTO therefore made "quality programmes" instead of advertising and was also responsible for traffic reports.

1931

1933

1934

Talkies hit the big screen. The new medium brought the spoken word into Swiss advertising: this complicated the distribution of tourism films in multilingual Switzerland.

In 1986 Markus Senn, working on a commission from the SNTO, recorded how more than 1,000 sheep being driven from the meadows of Zenbächen across the Aletsch glacier to Belalp (VS). Senn is now an official parliament photographer.
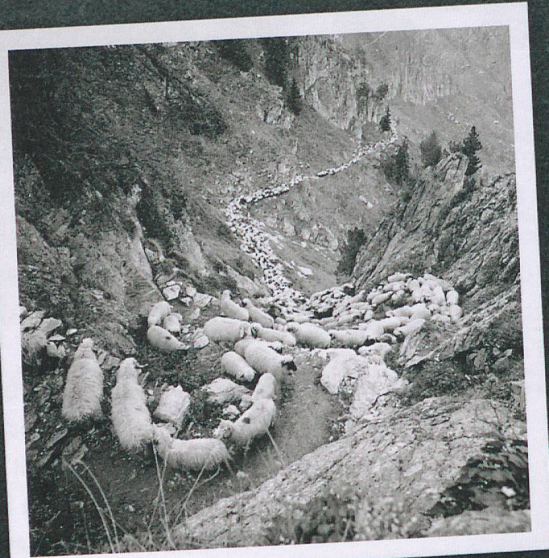
Philipp Giegel, who passed away in 1997, made his mark on the tourist image of Switzerland for over 50 years as an SNTO photographer. This picture was taken in 1952 at the entrance to the Gotthard Tunnel in Airolo.
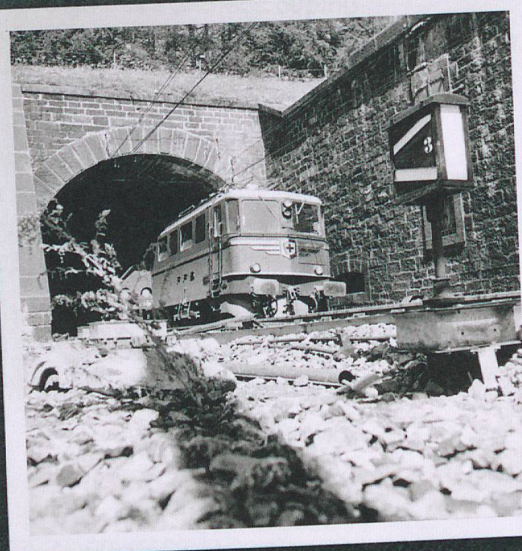

Heinz Schwab was not only the head of graphics and advertising at Switzerland Tourism, he also went out and about whenever there was an urgent need for a photographer – for example here, in the late 1980s, in front of the Palais des Nations in Geneva.
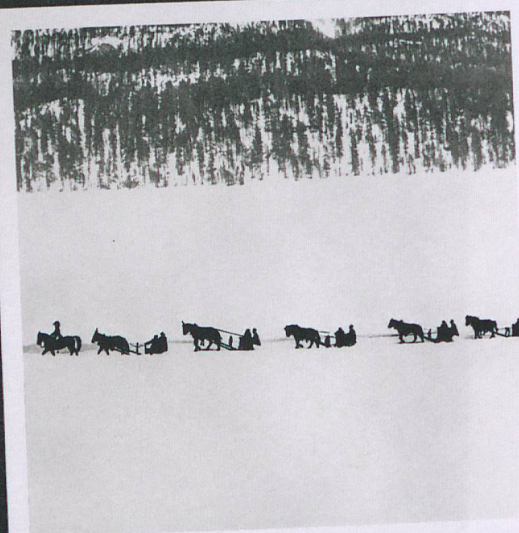
Here too, Philipp Giegel was behind the lens – in 1960 at the Schlitteda, the traditional Engadin winter sleigh ride. This dream photo later even made it onto an SNTO poster, becoming a real winter classic.
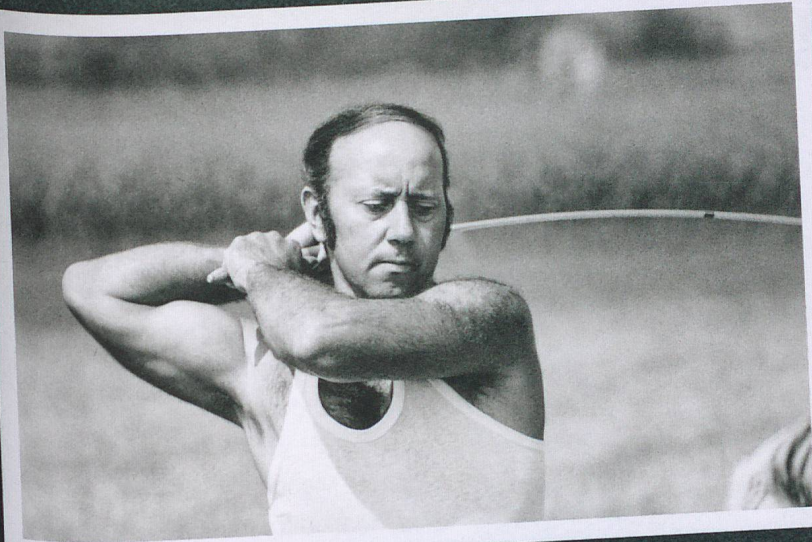
From 1981 to 1986 Lucia Degonda was a photographer at the SNTO and captured some hugely diverse tourism images on film. For example, the Swiss sport of hornussen at the Swiss Alpine Wrestling Festival in Langenthal, Bern, in 1983. Today, amongst other things, she is a lecturer at the Zurich University of the Arts.

French photographer Yann-Arthus Bertrand photographed "Switzerland from the air". Switzerland Tourism used the images for the 2014 summer campaign. Pictured: the Bernina range in Graubünden.