

Exhibition in the Museum of History, 11 March – 28 August, 2016

WATCH THIS! Genevan Timepieces in Basel

They are small, colourful and exquisite. They are made only of gleaming gold, silver and the finest raw materials. Watches are fascinating. They are also a Swiss trademark. At the heart of the exhibition «WATCH THIS!» are Genevan timepieces of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries drawn from the watch and clock collection of the Historical Museum Basel (HMB). The HMB's first special exhibition dedicated exclusively to timepieces will be on show at the Museum of History until 28 August 2016.

Background

Basel has one of the most important collections of watches and clocks in Switzerland, alongside La Chaux-de-Fonds, Geneva and Winterthur. The collections of timepieces entrusted to it by Maria Margaretha Bachofen-Vischer, Emanuel G. Sarasin-Grossmann, Eugen Gschwind, Carl and Lini Nathan-Rupp and other Basel collectors are normally housed in four rooms in the Museum of Domestic Culture. The special exhibition "WATCH THIS!" presents some of the pieces in those collections – specifically those made in Geneva – in a new location and a fresh context.

Why Genevan timepieces? Because they were the first to be produced on Swiss soil. And because their many different forms and superb enamelling make them enduringly fascinating. The purpose of this exhibition is to alert the public to this extraordinary collection on several different levels at once, including by raising awareness of "time" as a concept.

Content

The exhibition showcases 65 Genevan timepieces, anchoring them firmly in their historical context, specifically the emergence and early years of horology in Switzerland. The geographical, political and religious factors that made late 17th-century Geneva so attractive to horologists and enabled watchmaking to thrive there will also be examined. The technical innovations and craftsmanship that Geneva's watchmaking industry brought forth will be explained, and where possible cases demonstrated, and the history of Swiss watchmaking recounted right up to the present.

Visitors will also learn how the HMB came to be in possession of such an exceptional collection of timepieces, whose origins can be traced back to the passion of just a few individual collectors of the 20th century, all of whom had strong ties to Basel.

Watches are both measuring instruments and jewellery. They are part of our cultural heritage, but also a luxury product. Our exhibition embraces these opposite poles and renders them visible. It also addresses the phenomenon of time, which after all is what links the function of the exhibits and their history to the present.

After the exhibition, the background material and multimedia stations produced for it will be transferred to the Museum of Domestic Culture, becoming a permanent adjunct to the collection on show there.

Exhibition design

The exhibition layout and design are the work of Thomas Ebersbach. The aim was to give visitors an impression of Geneva as it was in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. The visual framework will be the watches' place of origin, i.e. the watchmaker's workshop, which will be evoked by abstract workbenches in the middle of the room.

While the walls are dedicated to the historical and modern context of Genevan timepieces, the inclusion of a meta-level also allows "Time" and "Watches Today" to be woven into the presentation.

Target audience

The exhibition is aimed at a wide target audience: traditional museum-goers, young people in their twenties and thirties and everyone who appreciates fine craftsmanship, including those at technical college or already practising a skilled trade. The HMB also wishes to promote dialogue with the (Asian) tourists, watchmakers and watch lovers who will be visiting Basel for Baselworld. The exhibition is presented in three languages: German, French and English, and there are to be tours in Chinese.

The exhibition is supported by the Dr. Eugen Gschwind-Stiftung and Oris. Oris is one of the last owner-run, independent watchmaking companies in Switzerland. Founded in Hölstein, a village in the hills of the Jura south of Basel in 1904, it has remained there to this day, producing mechanical watches that are both innovative and practical.

Exhibition venue: HMB – Museum of History, Barfüsserplatz, CH-4051 Basel

Exhibition dates: 11 March – 28 August 2016

Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday, 10 am – 5 pm
Closed: 25 March (Good Friday), 16 May (Whit Monday),
1 August (Swiss National Day)
Open: 28 March (Easter Monday) 10 am – 5 pm

Admission: CHF 15.-/10.-/5.-. An admission ticket also covers a single visit to the Museum of Domestic Culture, which is where the permanent exhibition of watches and clocks is housed. See the posters featuring key objects from the exhibition for directions.

Press information: www.hmb.ch/presse.html

Photos can be supplied by e-mail on request.

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