

MUSEUM FÜR MUSIKAUTOMATEN SEEWEN SO

Sammlung Dr. h.c.
Heinrich Weiss-Stauffacher

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Museum of Music Automatons

Following its opening in 1979 the Museum of Music Automatons was initially run as a private museum. It became a state institution in 1990 when its founder Dr. h.c. Heinrich Weiss-Stauffacher and his daughter Susanne Weiss donated both the museum and its collection to the Swiss Confederation. The origins of the museum's collection go back further, however. Heinrich Weiss began collecting timepieces at the age of twelve. He began adding Swiss wind-up music boxes, disc music boxes and many other mechanical music automatons in the early 1950s. Weiss says that this enthusiasm was based on a particular incident: "I spotted a Swiss music box in a shop in Basel and was shown how it worked. I was in a position to purchase it. The idea occurred to me to do more than only collect timepieces: I could also move into another typical Swiss product, namely the music box. I visited the National Museum in Zurich, but found only one music box and thought: there's my chance."

Collection

On its donation in 1990, the collection – originally consisting of 400 objects and 6000 music rolls and other such media – was initially administered by the Swiss National Museum, but remained at the Museum of Music Automatons when the latter came under the wing of the Federal Office of Culture in 2008.

The collection contains internationally important collections of Swiss wind-up and disc music boxes, clocks and jewellery with integrated musical mechanisms, as well as other mechanical music automatons from Switzerland and reference mechanisms from other countries from the 18th century to the present day. An appreciation of the sheer diversity of objects may be had from the following thematic groupings:

- Wind-up music boxes, railway station automatons and disc music boxes
- Jewellery and jewellery boxes, bird boxes, bird cages and bird organs
- Musical instruments, organs, barrel organs, orchestrions and other music automatons
- Carillons
- Musical clocks
- Pocket watches and other watches with musical mechanisms
- Animated figures
- Souvenirs and toys with musical mechanisms
- Tools and machines
- Phonographs, gramophones and jukeboxes
- Pictures, books and miscellaneous objects with musical mechanisms
- Music rolls and other such media

The collection has experienced a steady expansion since 1990 in accordance with the intention of its founder: it currently comprises some 1400 objects and 12,000 music rolls and audio media. It received a boost in 2006 through the acquisition of related objects – phonographs, gramophones and jukeboxes – from the Kornhaus Burgdorf Foundation, which was dormant. Acquisitions will continue to be made and donations accepted provided that they meet the criteria of Swiss provenance, quality, transparency of origin and value for money.

The aim of the collecting activities is to document the wind-up and disc music boxes, clocks and jewellery and corresponding technical innovations produced in the Jura region and which captured the world's imagination for more than a century. These objects illuminate an aspect of Switzerland's industrialisation that became one of the country's major export drivers in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

A living tradition in the Jura Arc

Located at about 610 metres above sea level in the Schwarzbubenland region of the Jura in Canton Solothurn, the Museum of Music Automats is accordingly also a popular destination for visitors in this north-western part of Switzerland. An extension, built to meet the requirements of a modern museum and doubling the exhibition space, opened in 2000.

Highlights of the institution's history include its donation to the Swiss Confederation in 1990, the ground-breaking ceremony (in the presence of Federal Councillor Otto Stich on 14 September 1995) and inauguration (in the presence of Federal Councillor Ruth Dreysfuss on 25 March 2000) of the extension, and the discovery of the history of the museum's Welte Philharmonie organ, which restoration work in 2007 revealed to be the long-lost organ of the ill-fated ocean liner Britannic, the younger sister ship of the equally ill-fated Titanic. This "Britannic" organ remains one of the main attractions of the museum.

Preserving Cultural Heritage

Switzerland ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2008. Recent years have seen several "living traditions" presented to the UNESCO and subsequently inscribed on the list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. On 21 March 2019 the craftsmanship of watchmaking was presented in this context. It is significant that the candidature did not remain narrowly defined in terms of its theme, but explicitly included the artisanal crafts of music box and automaton making. It was also submitted as a bi-national candidature of Switzerland and France. Finally, on 16 December 2020, the "craftsmanship of mechanical watchmaking and art mechanics" were inscribed by UNESCO on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, thus honouring a living tradition that characterises the region of the Swiss-French Jura Arc and underlining the importance of cultural heritage in a cross-border setting. Watchmaking in Switzerland today is a modern sector of industry with international appeal. However, it is still based almost exclusively on manual craftsmanship, which is particularly visible in the production of automatons and music boxes in Sainte-Croix and other places. Production in Sainte-Croix has maintained its status as an artisanal, manual craft to this day and enjoys great esteem, which is why the close link between watchmaking and the production of music automatons is recognised and emphasised in the UNESCO candidature. Being dedicated to preserving and imparting knowledge of this craft, the Museum of Music Automats is therefore of greater relevance today than it has ever been.

That said, the Museum of Music Automats is not just a technical museum devoted to preserving and mediating the hardware involved: it also looks at the music and the history. Even then, merely emphasising the technical, musical and historical aspects of the exhibits would not do them justice, because the automatons, in particular, also have a playful, theatrical side, which the museum showcases on its guided tours. The consequence of this diversity is that the Museum of Music Automats does not slot easily into the museum landscape – a privilege, but also a challenge.

Museum building

The museum building has four storeys. The ground floor houses the museum itself, which is open to the general public; it consists of four air-conditioned exhibition rooms. The spacious foyer, museum shop and museum restaurant are freely accessible. The foyer lends itself to events and concerts, which take place on a regular basis. The mezzanine floor houses administrative offices, a meeting room, a library and a photographic studio; the top floor houses the in-house restoration workshop and the items in the museum's collection not on display are in a secure storeroom providing a climatically controlled environment.

The museum's library is available on request to institutions and the general public. The library is the visible part of a scientific centre of excellence, of which the Museum of Music Automats is part. The museum collaborates with universities, experts and specialists by making the technical, curatorial and conservation knowledge of its staff available.

Special exhibitions and anniversary exhibition

The Museum of Music Automats holds special exhibitions of items in its own collection at regular intervals. Recent years have seen individual aspects of the collection highlighted: phonographs and gramophones; jukeboxes; Swiss wind-up and disc music boxes; watches and jewellery with musical mechanisms; orchestrions, piano and organ instruments.



Museum of Music Automats



Foyer



Restaurant

Further information about the Seewen Museum of Music Automaton, Canton Solothurn

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The entire museum is wheelchair accessible.

Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Groups on a guided tour can also visit the museum outside these opening hours before 11 a.m. or until 8 p.m.

Admission includes participation in the guided tours which are conducted daily and during which music automaton are explained and demonstrated.

Daily guided tours:

Room 1-3 12.20, 2 and 4 p.m. (demonstration of music automaton, 60 minutes)

Room 4 1.40 and 3.40 p.m. (demonstration of the Britannic organ, 20 minutes)

Discounts are available for families, groups, military, AHV/IV, apprentices, students.

Free admission for children below the age of 6, ICOM card holders, Swiss Museum Pass holders, Museum-PASS-Musées holders, Raiffeisen Switzerland personal credit card holders, Friends of the National Museum Zurich, Society of Prangins Museum members and Society of the Seewen Museum of Music Automaton (GMS) members.

Free admission for primary and lower secondary school classes, which also benefit from a special guided tour or workshop (by prior arrangement).

There is a PostBus stop just outside the museum: "Seewen SO, Musikautomaten". If alighting at "Seewen SO, Zelgli", it's a 10-minute (signposted) walk to the museum. Coach and car parking is available in front of the museum.

The museum shop is open Tuesdays to Sundays between noon and 5.30 p.m.

The museum restaurant with outdoor terrace can accommodate groups. Enquiries and bookings:
+41 (0)61 911 14 00
or email: museum-restaurant-seewen@bluewin.ch.