

Cultural relations between Japan and Switzerland

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Already in the late 16th century, Japan and Switzerland had their first contact when a Jesuit from Lucerne, Renward Cysat, published the first European book about Japan. Likely based on the accounts of others, it included the first map of Japan known in the German-speaking area. The first Swiss citizen to set foot on Japanese soil was Captain Elie Ripon from Fribourg, traveling in the service of the Dutch East India Company, he arrived in Nagasaki in 1623 and reported his observations to European audiences.

In 1805, the Zürich born physicist Johann Kaspar Horner visited Japan as part of a Russian scientific and diplomatic mission to circumnavigate the globe. While the hope to open trade links with Japan was not fulfilled, Horner did initiate scientific exchange with the first demonstrations of a Western hot air balloon made of Japanese washi paper. He has left several sketches from this trip.

Not until the final years of the Edo period were closer ties between Japan and Switzerland established. Aimé Humbert-Droz, a native of Neuchâtel, led an official delegation to Japan in 1861 with the goal of opening new markets for the watch industry and the textile manufacturers in St Gallen. He ultimately played a key role in concluding the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Switzerland and Japan in 1864, an event which recently celebrated its 150th anniversary.

As a consequence, Swiss trading houses in Yokohama were among the leading exporters of Japanese silk in the 19th century and in return, Switzerland exported fabrics and watches in quantities. The trade of Swiss watches to Japan flourished and the Swiss controlled the Japanese watch market until the beginning of the 20th century.

During his ten months of extensive travels across Japan, Humbert closely examined the country's history, geography, religion, social institutions, political system and customs. On his return, he published the monumental «Le Japon Illustré». The book included illustrations he had bought in Japan as well as sketches by artists who had accompanied him on his journey.

Today, Switzerland and Japan enjoy close ties in many different fields, including commerce and research. Culture is an important area in which Switzerland and

Japan are constantly engaged in lively exchange. Switzerland has captured the attention of the Japanese public in many ways. Most importantly, to many Japanese, the Swiss Alps is the image associated with Switzerland, due in part to the popularity of the 1974 anime series *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*, directed by Isao Takahata. Johanna Spyri, the Swiss author of the novel on which the series is based, spent her childhood years in Hirzau. The magnificent natural environment in which her character, Heidi, grew up has remained largely unchanged to this day. Heidi played an important role in helping to shape the positive image that Switzerland enjoys among many Japanese today.