

Press release

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## Splendid Sleighs

**In the 17th and 18th centuries, owning an ornate sleigh was *de rigueur* for any person of decent social standing. This was how you showcased your wealth to the public. However, these apparatus were nothing like the ones we use today for fun in the snow.**

For centuries, people have used status symbols to emphasise their special position in society. Nowadays, it might be fast sports cars, huge luxury yachts or delectable caviar aperitifs. In the past, it was precious jewels, palatial country homes or magnificent sleighs. In the 17th and 18th centuries, these winter conveyances weren't just for fun – their main purpose was image and prestige.

Sleighting had been an established feature of life at the royal courts of Europe since the 16th century. The precisely choreographed rides demonstrated quite plainly to the populace who ruled the roost. And the more elaborately decorated and fancifully shaped the sleigh, the greater the impact. The prosperous middle classes copied the habits of courtly life, and started having extravagant sleighs made for themselves. These conveyances were decorated with family emblems, scenic views or fabulous mythical beasts. Competition among sleigh-owners to have the most spectacular specimen was fierce. No effort or expense was spared. And that applied not only to the manufacture of the vehicles, but also to their care and maintenance, because in order to impress, the sleighs had to be regularly repaired and repainted.

Towards the end of the 18th century, sleighting shifted more and more from the princely court to the town square. In addition to affluent middle-class families, students also started organising sleigh rides. The conveyances were also popular for the wild parades that were held during *Fasnacht*, the Shrovetide or carnival season. These spectacles often ended in a drinking spree or a bit of surreptitious hanky-panky; as a result, sleighting was periodically banned.

The Swiss National Museum has an amazing collection of magnificent sleighs. This is the first time it has been possible to display these luxurious vehicles in large numbers. A special focus is on the one-of-a-kind sleighs in the shape of animals

and mythical beasts and the fascinating stories behind them, revealing all about the carefully orchestrated sleigh rides, the families who owned them and the designs displayed on these fantastic conveyances. The exhibition even features a photo station, where visitors can take a picture of themselves on an ornate sleigh and forward the digital image.

**If you have any questions, please contact:**

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