

Press release

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## Traditional tales from the Alps

**Whether it's the tale of the Blüemlisalp, William Tell or the Devil's Bridge, the Swiss Alps are steeped in legends. At the National Museum Zurich, some of these stories are being told right now.**

When dolls come to life, fertile pastures transform into stony deserts or a woman takes on animal form, we've truly entered the realm of legends and folk tales. Unlike fairy tales, this type of story can have a veneer of credibility because legends are always connected to real places. Historical legends in particular can appear to have a ring of "truth". Reputed or actual figures from history are placed in real locations. One of the most famous examples is Tell's shooting of the apple. The story, which first appeared in Nordic mythology, fitted perfectly with the realities of life in Central Switzerland and as time went by it evolved into an important liberation myth. William Tell was a hero whose story offers a plethora of different angles: his message could be related to rebelling against authority figures, it could highlight the necessity of having one's own independence, or it might reinforce the courage to resist. Tell was later stylised as a national hero, and his crossbow has become a seal of quality for products from Switzerland.

The first person to set down the story of William Tell in writing was Hans Schriber. The Obwalden county scribe immortalised the legendary hero in the *White Book of Sarnen* in 1470. Another famous legend was put on paper about 250 years later. In 1707, physician and natural scientist Johann Jakob Scheuchzer published the legend of the *Blüemlisalp*. A vain and wasteful herdsman lives in plenty on his fertile alp, while the people in the valley below are starving. But he refuses to share his abundance, and even derides the despairing valley dwellers. As a punishment, the thriving alp transforms into a wasteland of rocks and ice. The legend can be found throughout the Alpine region in a number of different variations, and Scheuchzer was quick to recognise its instructional function.

Regardless of how much truth they contain, legends still exert a powerful influence today. And when the shadows lengthen and suddenly take on the shape of the devil, or a mountain stream thunders down a ravine, growling and raging like a dragon, it's easy to understand why these phenomena used to strike fear into people's hearts.

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

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