

colonial – Switzerland's Global Entanglements

National Museum Zurich | 13.9.24 – 19.1.25 | 2nd floor extension

Tour of the exhibition

The exhibition has two parts: the first part is bigger and comprises 11 chapters addressing themes through which Swiss people, businesses and communities were entangled with colonialism. The second part of the exhibition focuses on colonial legacies up to the present day.

Prologue

The exhibition prologue sets out the themes relevant to European colonialism and provides basic information through a timeline and maps. The timeline lists selected events from world history to help visitors understand the broader context. One of several artworks hangs over the timeline – an embroidered world map by Filipino artist Cian Dayrit. The exhibition tells its story through historic artefacts, plus the use of contemporary artistic pieces to add other perspectives to the analysis of a colonial past. Visitors will also receive a glossary with detailed definitions of some terms that feature in the exhibition.

Part 1: Historical tour

Slavery: Each chapter starts with an object, in this case it's a cotton branch. No other commodity is more evocative of slavery than cotton. From the 16th century, Europeans established plantations and mines in the Caribbean and the Americas and started importing slave labour from Africa. The transatlantic slave trade peaked in the 18th century. Over 250 Swiss companies, private individuals and some communes participated in this transnational business, in some cases earning a fortune from slave labour and trading (others also incurred major losses). It is estimated that Swiss nationals were involved in deporting about 172,000 people. In the region of 11-12 million people were transported from Africa to the colonies to work as slaves.

Trade: This chapter starts with a cocoa bean. It is a symbol of the trade in raw materials and cocoa was indispensable to the development of the Swiss chocolate industry. Swiss businesses have traded colonial goods since the 16th century, such as silk, spices, tobacco or tea – and later textiles. This enabled Switzerland, a country lacking in raw materials, to grow its own trading houses into leading commodity traders in the 19th century. Today, Switzerland is one of the biggest and most significant commodity trading centres.

Mercenaries: A Dutch East India Company rifle in the display window serves as a reminder of Switzerland's mercenaries and their violent involvement in colonialism. From the end of the 16th century, Swiss mercenaries served in European armies, which embarked on colonial conquests, crushed resistance movements and maintained the colonial order. Unemployment and poverty, as well as images of masculinity based on heroism and thirst for adventure, convinced many young men to join foreign militaries.

Settler colonies: From 1600, colonial governments established settler colonies, where Europeans cultivated supposedly unpopulated land and used it for their own profit. This brought the settlers into conflict with the indigenous people. Although Switzerland itself was never a colonial power, its people did on occasion play a part in the forced displacement of the indigenous population. There are many places today that were recognisably once Swiss settlement colonies as they are often named after Swiss places, for example New Bern in the US.

The colonial gaze: Photographs by Walter Mittelholzer, who undertook a number of flights from 1927 to 1934, shaped the Swiss view of African men and women. That 'colonial gaze' – i.e. stereotypical photographs – is still firmly anchored in Switzerland's collective memory. The opposite wall has photographs from Swiss plantations in Sumatra. The pictures show the daily interaction between the colonised and the colonisers, thus revealing the diverse colonial hierarchies.

Mission: Swiss missionaries started to travel the world in the 16th century in order to convert the locals to Christianity. The cross does not just stand for the *Missio*, i.e. spreading the faith, but also for the belief that Christianity and European culture are superior to all other religions and cultures. Back at home, the missionaries painted a picture of inferior societies in the colonial lands. For a long time, women were only allowed to engage in missionary work if they were married. The Basel Mission only started recruiting single women as missionaries in 1901.

Experts: The pith helmet is a symbol of the colonial rulers. It protects against the heat, wind and weather; it also helped them stand out from the local population. Swiss people also wore the pith helmet in the colonies. The colonial overlords employed Swiss mercenaries and professionals with expert knowledge of their field. They helped annex and administer colonial territories and introduced such things as taxation to colonised people, while engineers built infrastructure, bridges and rail tracks for example.

Science: Scientific research was also conducted under the protection of colonial governments and quite a few Swiss went to the colonies as researchers. This is symbolised by the telescope of Paul Sarasin, a famous natural scientist from Basel, who frequently visited colonial lands to conduct research around the end of the 19th century. Swiss scientists measured people and animals in the name of science. They photographed and categorised them and brought objects and human remains back to Swiss museums. The findings of this research reflected and underpinned the racist attitudes prevalent at the time and justified colonial expansion. Another type of exploitation was the appropriation of indigenous knowledge of landscapes, animals and plants. Europeans derived fame and profit from the knowledge of indigenous originators, without acknowledging their sources or sharing their rewards.

Exploitation of nature: Several elephant tusks symbolise this chapter. They are the trophies of big game hunters. The colonies were seen as an inexhaustible source of raw materials to fuel Europe's technological advancement: the Swiss played their part in the biodiversity reduction and deforestation in the former colonies, as in Sumatra for example, where many Swiss either worked on or owned plantations.

Racism: This chapter features a measuring calliper used to measure people in order to allocate them to 'races'. The Zurich Anthropology Institute was a leading European authority at the start of the 20th century. The institute developed some of its measuring methods and instruments in the colonies. Scientific racism propagated by these institutions helped legitimise the rule over and exploitation of the colonies. It spread from the universities to the Swiss public from where it permeated everyday life. In addition, ethnographic, medical, natural scientific and missionary journals as well as travel reports helped spread racist portrayals of people. The burgeoning consumer culture with its advertising in the early 20th century showed colonial images, romantic and exotic pictures of faraway people, to the Swiss public.

Decolonisation: Decolonisation began in earnest after the Second World War. From the 1960s, Switzerland sought to cultivate strong business ties with Africa's new independent states, as they were full of potential consumers. Aspects of Swiss foreign policy are examined based on three examples (Senegal, Rwanda and South Africa).

Part 2: Colonial legacies

The bronze sculpture by Genevan artist Mathias C. Pfund – a fallen miniature of David de Pury, the Neuchâtel businessman involved in the slave trade in the 18th century – is a nod to the current debate as to whether monuments to famous men from the colonial past should be removed. This question takes us to the last part of the exhibition, where the impact of colonialism is still present and debated today. What does our colonial legacy mean to present-day Switzerland? A dialogue video installation in the form of a platform presents many different ways in which the legacy of colonialism lives on, with debates on colonial heritage in institutions and the public sphere. The question of responsibility and reparation in present-day Switzerland is also addressed.

At the end of the exhibition, visitors are invited to reflect on the content of the exhibition and to leave their own impressions and opinions.