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Our Federal Parliament Building (end)

National monument and seat of government

The administrative east wing was still under construction when the third competition in 1891 on the final shape of the finished parliament building was held. The winner was once again Hans Wilhelm Auer, now truly in first place. This meant that two-thirds of the seat of government would bear his signature.

Auer came to this new contest with an idea which was in itself remarkable. The jury of the 1885 competition had reproached him for wanting to build the dome "only" over the staircase, when it should always be over the

*Martin Fröhlich**

most important space in any public building. But in his 1891 project the architect grouped both chambers of parliament together with the great staircase so as to make of the whole building a "Swiss national monument". This idea was to inform the whole building concept:

- Everything was to be carried out by Swiss companies, Swiss craftsmen and Swiss artists.
- Only Swiss materials (with very few exceptions) were to be used.
- All artistic decoration was to be devoted to Swiss subjects. The federal dome was to be a First-of-August fire which would shine over the land with its gilded copper roof by day and with 22 electrically illuminated windows by night. The fire was surrounded by watchers on the mountains and in the valleys – represented on the sculptured pediment.

The main facade

The main facade towards the Federal Place is a statement that the Council

House of the Confederation (CURIA CONFOEDERATIONIS HELVETICA-E in Latin) should be inspired by Independence, accompanied by the Executive and Legislative Bodies (a sculptured group on the pediment) and Wisdom (a sphinx at each end). These rest on the Freedom of 1291 and the Peace of 1848 (statues and inscriptions by the windows of the Upper House) which include the German, French and Italian language areas (featured in the windows themselves). Freedom and Peace can be assured only if all those who enter and depart show Wisdom, Strength and Courage in their dealings, demonstrating respect for History (the figure on the left of the main entrance) and responsibility towards the future in their Historiography and Journalism (right of the entrance).

Beneath the dome

The great hall beneath the dome is dominated by the arms of the cantons around the Swiss cross. These are patterned like a compass: to the north is the great stained glass window showing Transport and Trade against the Lake of Constance, to the east the Textile Industry against the Lake of Zurich, to the south Agriculture against the Jungfrau mountains and to the east Heavy

Through the arcades painted on the rear wall of the Council of States chamber may be glimpsed a Landsgemeinde (open air assembly) in Nidwald. (Photo: AFB)

Industry against the Lake of Geneva. The centre of the hall holds a group of three sculptured figures who have just accomplished the federal oath watched by a labourer from each language area – German, French, Italian, Romansh.

The two parliamentary chambers

The decoration of the Upper House – or Council of States – shows the history of Swiss institutions, starting with the Landsgemeinde assemblies. The Lower House has the arms of the biggest towns in Switzerland, since the National Council represents the population as a whole. Its history began in the Schwytz lake scenery of Charles Giron's painting "The Cradle of Switzerland" above the Speaker's chair, showing the Rütli meadow, Schwyz and Mythen seen from Seelisberg – flanked by statues of William Tell and Gertrud Stauffacher. The ceiling paintings of the great reception hall show the virtues and achievements of the Swiss.

The building also contains curtains of rich embroidery from St. Gall, papier maché wallpapers from Neuchâtel, stained glass windows by Basle and Grisons painters, a meeting room with carved panelling from the school of Brienz, which was shown at the Paris World Exhibition of 1900 and received a prize there.

With all these riches Switzerland possesses a seat of government which is a national monument of great artistic worth – a building which can appeal to Swiss people everywhere. ■



* Office for Federal Buildings, responsible for the upkeep of federal monuments.