

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 23 (1996)
Heft: 1

Artikel: Contemporary furniture design in Switzerland : pioneers of the Zeitgeist
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907733>

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Contemporary furniture design in Switzerland

Pioneers of the Zeitgeist

It ranks amongst the best in the world. But the reputation of Swiss furniture design is not universally acknowledged. Not yet, that is. Once its harmony of function and form, its elegant restraint and its original use of fewer materials are finally recognised there will be no holding it back.

Conservative as Switzerland sometimes appears, there are pioneers in the field of furniture design who are both passionate about their work and extremely innovative. How else can we explain the fact that a carpenter and

Alice Baumann

inventor called Hans Zaugg has built on the outskirts of Derendingen, Canton Soleure, a white-tiled pavilion in which he designs and sells furniture, welcomes visitors, runs courses – and only incidentally, so it appears, actually lives there. And amongst the chairs, tables and beds there are three bright red Ferraris parked in perfect alignment. No, laughs 60-year old Zaugg, he did not design them – he just likes them. That is answer enough. He later adds that Ferrari was also a nutcase who believed in his own Utopia.

Brimming with ideas

Zaugg was in on the act when in 1987/88 the famous plastic Swatch was thought up – a designer product which polished up Switzerland's tarnished image as a watchmaking country. Today he advises companies, government bodies and education institutions. He is part of a team elaborating new ways of working and living together – both spiritually and spatially, it must be said. And he is also into product design.

His centre for design and innovation might well be described as a think factory. Zaugg dismisses comments like "that's no good", "we do things differently", "if the thing was worth doing it would have been done already". He claims that only a fifth of all ideas are actually realised. In any case, can design be taught? "It would be wrong not to try", he says.

Innovation is the opposite of tradition. Architect Fritz Haller is one of those who have succeeded in jumping

national boundaries. Decades ago he developed USM Haller, a metal shelf and table system for homes, offices and doctors' practices which is now known the world over.

Other creations are the chairs by Vitra in Basle and Wogg's synthetic resin tables. The latter are already popular in Japan. At present artist Heinz Julen from Zermatt is making headlines. He has built a house out of glass and at the same time designed the furniture for it. His 'cube system' is amazing to see. It is a crate which can be used either as an armchair or a container.

The remarkable thing about these achievements is that it is mostly lone entrepreneurs or small offices with 10 to 15 staff who are behind them: "Unlike in the countries around us, it is un-Swiss to work in large groups", says Peter Spahr of Berne's Zona furniture business. And the quality? Swiss furniture has a long life span and is environmentally compatible, multi-purpose, cheap to manufacture and user-friendly. It is also exclusive: there are often less than 2,000 of any given piece.

Swiss quality also extends to lamps, according to Basle's Dieter Haldimann, owner of the shop of the same name. He rejoices "that Swiss design is now very well received throughout Europe after living a shadow existence for years".

Carefully fashioned

But Swiss design finds its highest acceptance level at home. "No other country in the world can boast that 10% of the population takes pleasure in an architecture-oriented and culture-conscious style of furniture", says Köbi Gantenbein, editor of 'Hochparterre', the magazine for architecture and creativity. What does design mean to him? "A new piece of furniture is always an invention and unites engineering skills with durability and sympathetic hand-

ling of materials. It touches on artistic creation, that's its allure".

Not only is the furniture tough, but so is the market. Edi Franz, owner of the Intraform furniture business in Berne, describes the Swiss design scene as "steady and therefore strong". "Things are not produced just for show, as is often the case in Italy. The inventor prefers to develop his ideas further rather than to start again from scratch. That's why the furniture looks mature".

Edi Franz says Swiss buyers are very demanding in terms of design, manufacture and execution, as well as real understanding of materials. "By this I mean the knack of using them right. Exactly that is the central message of the word 'design'".

Reasonable prices

Forum 8 is a marketing group made up of eight designers, Thut, Wogg, Röthlisberger, Belux, Lehni, Seilaz, Seleform and Greter. For Rosmarie Horn, co-owner of Berne furniture shop Teo Jakob, they represent Swiss design. She particularly likes Kurt Thut, who made his name with a bed, an aluminium cupboard and office furniture. "His creations are something new in terms of both looks and price. He and his partners have proved that Swiss design does not have to be expensive!"

Good-looking as an Italian

Going the rounds of Swiss furniture shops makes one thing clear. The Swiss are proud of their home-grown talent. And Swiss design sells just as well abroad, particularly in Germany. But, admits expert Rosmarie Horn, customers who know no better often say: "That's a beautiful cupboard, it must be Italian". Her prompt answer: "Not at all". ■

