

SWITZERLAND AT A GLANCE

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THE PAINTED PANORAMA of the 19th century was one of the most important mass media before the age of cinema and TV. Three Swiss panoramas, still open to the public today, are unique examples of the medium. The word 'panorama' sounds Greek, and ancient, too. It is indeed Greek in its origins – a combination of *pan* (all) and *horama* (to view) – but ancient it is not. The word was used for the first time in 1791 in a London advertisement, four years after the invention of the thing itself.

A panorama is a huge 360-degree naturalistic painting, hung from the inner wall of a circular building called a rotunda. It is illuminated by natural light coming in through the roof, and often features a three-dimensional foreground meant to reinforce the illusion of 'being there'. The public climbs through a dark staircase onto a central platform shaded by a canopy, from where the painting can be seen in all its splendour.

Funnily enough, the inventor of this king-size medium was a painter who specialised in miniatures, the Irishman Robert Barker (1739–1806). There is a nice story to go with his invention. Supposedly, Barker had little success as an artist. He therefore was in debt rather often and ended up in prison. In his cell, a ray of sunlight fell through a small opening near the ceiling onto the rounded wall. Having plenty of time to study the effect, Barker decided to use it for his painting once he was released.¹

BARKER'S FIRST PANORAMA

In 1787 Barker surprised London citizens with a 180-degree painting of Edinburgh, which he presented in a darkened room lit from above. One year later he added a further 180 degrees and the first true panorama was born. Barker did not yet use that name, preferring the French term *la nature à coup d'oeil* ('nature at a glance'). He took out a patent in which he described in astonishingly precise terms what would be a comprehensive definition of the painted panorama over the following hundred years.

Critics turned up their noses at Barker's invention, advising him to 'stop this useless experimenting'. The public was hesitant, too. It was only when Barker replaced his Edinburgh painting with a view of London that Londoners became interested in the new medium. Eventually Barker managed to find financial backers and built his own rotunda on Leicester Square, where he showed a dramatic painting of the Russian fleet at Spithead. This had an enormous success, setting off a true 'panomania' throughout Europe.

France got its first panorama in 1799. This was devised and built by the famous American engineer Robert Fulton (1765–1815), later the inventor of the steamship and the submarine. The painting showed a view of Paris (what else would you expect in France!). One year later Germany opened its first panorama in Berlin, with a view of Rome painted by Johann Adam Breysig (1766–1831), a theatrical painter who specialised in the *trompe l'oeil* technique. Both Fulton and Breysig claimed to have invented the panorama well before Barker. However, the Irishman had clearly won the race, since he had been first to present his invention to the public.

THE AGE OF WIDENING HORIZONS

Soon other big cities had their own panoramas: Vienna, Amsterdam, St Petersburg and many more. But why were people at the end of the 18th century so crazy about circular paintings?

The panorama hit the mood of the moment. The discovery of the horizon – in both the literal and a wider sense of the word – was *the* big issue of the period. It was the time when Goethe and others travelled to Italy to broaden their knowledge, when hot air balloons rose above cities to give passengers circular views of the world, when people started climbing mountains to have a panoramic experience of God's creation. And those who did not have the opportunity to travel, fly or climb could go to the local panorama as a substitute.

NOTES

1. The story of Barker's prison invention (in a slightly different version) is given in, among other sources, *The Panorama Phenomenon* (Den Haag: Panorama Mesdag, 2006), 12, which gives an excellent short overview of the world's surviving panoramas. Other essential general sources include Ralph Hyde, *Panomania! The art and entertainment of the 'all-embracing view'* (London: Trefoil Publications, 1988) and Bernard Comment, *The Panorama* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999).

Panoramas got bigger and bigger. Later in the 19th century London boasted the biggest panorama ever built, the Colosseum, opened in 1829. Its huge rotunda, a rough copy of the Roman Pantheon, was located in Regent's Park. It bore a canvas of 2,230 square metres, which is about one-third of the size of a football field. The central viewing platform rose 90 feet (30 metres) above the ground. It was reached by an elevator and had telescopes to look at details in the painting, which once again showed a view of London.

However, it was not its huge size that allowed the panorama to become big business. The marketing breakthrough came with standardisation and multiplication. The French panoramist Jean-Charles Langlois (1789–1870) and the German-born architect Jakob Ignaz Hittorf (1792–1867) defined what would become the European standard for panoramas. In 1839 on the Champs Élysées in Paris they built a rotunda 120 feet (40 metres) in diameter and 60 feet (20 metres) high, a self-supporting steel structure without supports or pillars. Their painting of the sea battle at Navarino featured a three-dimensional foreground (the sea) in which the public stood on a platform built in the shape of a frigate. The distance to the canvas was an ideal 40 feet (12 metres). Daylight coming from above was controlled by a clever system of reflectors made of white fabric.

The Hittorf rotunda, as it was called, was copied dozens of times. Thanks to its standard size the paintings could now also be standardised and therefore easily exchanged. They were sent from one city to another and the public got a choice of subjects, much as in today's cinemas.

A NEW ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

In the middle years of the 19th century there was money to be made with panoramas – thanks not only to Langlois and Hittorf, but also to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. With the conflict growing fiercer, the two belligerent countries involved used the panorama for their own national propaganda: peaceful panoramic city views were replaced by heroic war scenes. Some Belgian investors took advantage of the situation and established the first joint stock panorama company, the 'Société Anonyme des Panoramas'. About 20 other international companies followed this example, their only interest in panoramas being to make the most money possible. By the end of the 19th century there were around 250 panoramas in Europe. Berlin alone had six of them. Robert Barker's invention had become an entertainment industry.

It is no wonder, then, that the panorama was a star at national and international fairs and exhibitions. It is rather a paradox, though, that it was a world fair that dealt the death blow to the panorama proper. The Paris World Exposition of 1900 boasted seven splendid panoramas, but alas, they stayed empty. People only had eyes for two new, revolutionary exhibits: the Lumière brothers' 360-degree slide projection 'Photorama' and Raoul Grimoin-Sanson's 360-degree movie projection 'Cinéorama'. Although panoramic projection never really made a breakthrough, the new techniques of slide and cinema projection pushed the painted panorama out of the way and became its direct successors.

Today there are about 30 panoramas still open to the public worldwide. A considerable number of them were built and painted well after the decline of European panomania, such as the Cairo panorama of 1988 and even younger ones in China and North Korea.

THE PANORAMAS OF SWITZERLAND

Three of the few 19th-century panoramas still preserved are located in Switzerland. The Wocher Panorama in Thun is the oldest existing panorama in the world, the Bourbaki Panorama in Lucerne has the only original 19th-century rotunda still in use, and the Crucifixion Panorama in Einsiedeln is probably the only panorama which was mistakenly reduced to ashes by a blowtorch. Two other Swiss panoramas are not on display: one lies rolled up in an army warehouse, while the other rests at the bottom of the Irish Sea. I will look at them in chronological order.

In 1814, 20 years after Robert Barker's Spithead Panorama, a Swiss artist by the name of Marquard Fidelis Wocher (1760–1830) opened a small panorama in Basel. He had spent five years painting



1. Part of Wocher's Panorama of Thun – the fields shown in the middle distance are the location of the modern rotunda in which the panorama itself is housed



2-4. Some of the delightful human and animal details of the Wocher Panorama which, together with the relatively small size of the rotunda, give this panorama a special intimacy and charm



5. The 1961 rotunda housing the Wocher Panorama, in the grounds of the Schadaupark, Thun

(all photos: Richard Crangle)

a bird's eye view of the city of Thun (Figs 1-4), and his work was quite a success. But Wocher never earned enough money to pay off the construction costs of his rotunda. When he died in 1830, his panorama was sold and changed hands several times. When the rotunda was finally pulled down, the canvas was given to the city of Thun. As the city officials did not know what to do with it, they buried it under the floorboards of a school building and forgot about it. It was only by chance that Wocher's painting reappeared when the school building was demolished many years later. In 1961 a private investor built a small rotunda in Thun (Fig. 5) to enable the city to exhibit its new-found treasure.²

For half a century Marquard Fidelis Wocher had no successors. It was only in 1881 that the famous Bourbaki Panorama opened in Geneva. The Bourbaki Panorama was certainly the most successful and interesting Swiss panorama and will therefore be described in more detail a little later.

The third of the five Swiss panoramas had a rather sad destiny. It was painted by the Genevan painter Auguste Baud-Bovy (1848–99) for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, and showed the splendid view from the top of the Männlichen mountain in the Bernese Oberland. Back in Europe, the painting was displayed in Geneva and later represented Switzerland at world fairs in the Netherlands, Paris and Dublin. In Dublin its odyssey ended: a storm damaged the temporary rotunda, tore the canvas to pieces and blew the Bernese Alps out to sea.

The Crucifixion Panorama of Einsiedeln – Swiss panorama number four – was painted in Germany after a biblical scene already displayed in Vienna. A German panorama promoter tried to sell it to the wealthy monastery in Einsiedeln, but the monks thought it to be much too profane. In 1893, the promoter eventually found a more secular local investor who displayed the Crucifixion in the town of Einsiedeln in a wooden rotunda – a choice of material which much later would prove to be fatal. In 1960, the day before the Einsiedeln panorama was due to reopen after a costly renovation, an unlucky plumber set fire to the building with his blowtorch. After 40 minutes there was nothing left but a pile of ashes. A private foundation had the Einsiedeln rotunda rebuilt (this time in steel and concrete – Fig. 6) and the crucifixion scene repainted according to existing photographs of the original. Many observers have said that the new painting (Figs 7–8) is better than the original.

The fifth and last of the panoramas showed one of the decisive battles in Swiss history: the battle of Murten (or Morat) of 1476. The painting was the work of the famous German panoramist Louis Braun (1836–1916). It was first shown in Zürich in 1894, then moved to Geneva, and was later sold to a collector who gave it to the city of Murten. Much like their colleagues in Thun, the town officials of Murten were rather perplexed. They unrolled the huge gift in a schoolyard and let their townspeople have a look at it, then rolled it up again and packed it away in a warehouse. Here it dozed for about 80 years before it had a short but intense renaissance: for the duration of the Swiss National Exhibition in 2002 it hung in a building specially designed by star architect Jean Nouvel and impressed thousands of happy visitors. It is currently stowed away in a Swiss army warehouse – at least a safe place – and a private panorama association is trying hard to find a location where the battle of Murten can be displayed permanently.³

THE BOURBAKI PANORAMA

Among the many panoramas built in the 19th century the Bourbaki Panorama in Lucerne has a unique place. Like many other panoramas it presents a scene of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71, but it does so in a highly unconventional way. It shows not victory, but defeat; not a battle, but its consequences; no heroes, but the victims of war: the beaten French Army entering Switzerland in search of political asylum.

In late 1870 part of the French Army, under General Charles Bourbaki (1816–97), had been surrounded by German troops near the north-western border of Switzerland. It was an extremely cold winter, the French were untrained and poorly equipped, their supplies of food and ammunition were gone and the situation was hopeless. Bourbaki himself attempted suicide; one of his officers took over the command and decided to ask the Swiss for political asylum. A defeated army of 90,000 men flooding into tiny Switzerland – never before had the neutral state faced such a situation.

The Swiss agreed under the condition that the French troops should be completely disarmed. Thus, on 1 February 1871 the 'Bourbakis', as they came to be called, crossed the border into Switzerland and were dispersed to refugee camps all over the country. It was the largest humanitarian act in Swiss history. The biggest group (34,000 men) entered Switzerland through the tiny village of Les Verrières near Neuchâtel.

A WORK OF PERSONAL AFFECTION

Among the sick and hungry men was a young Red Cross volunteer, Geneva-born Edouard Castres (1838–1902). Castres had started a career as a portrait painter for the Genevan upper classes. But he was so impressed by Henri Dunant's creation of the Red Cross organisation in 1863, in response to the plight of soldiers wounded in warfare, that he decided to volunteer as a 'samaritan' in the Franco-Prussian War. Castres joined the Bourbaki army and himself lived through the horrors of the long winter of 1870–71.



6. The 1960s rotunda housing the Einsiedeln Panorama of Christ's Crucifixion

Back in Geneva, nightmares of this experience haunted Castres. He found relief in painting scenes of the defeat. The paintings made him instantly famous, and a local panorama promoter commissioned him to paint the drama of the border crossing on a 360-degree canvas. So Castres spent the winter of 1876–77 in Les Verrières, sketching the landscape. Back in his studio he focused on details such as uniforms, weapons and horses. He had five years to complete his preparatory work, until the new rotunda was ready on Boulevard Plainpalais in Geneva. Now Castres started painting the canvas, which was hanging in situ in the rotunda. He employed a dozen painters, among them young Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918), who later became one of the most famous Swiss artists ever.

At the time panorama painters applied almost the same techniques as stage painters. They worked with extended brushes from scaffolding platforms, while the panoramist stood on the centre platform supervising the work and shouting out commands. Some panoramists used projection lanterns to throw their sketches onto the canvas, but not Castres, who believed in the traditional methods.

The Bourbaki Panorama opened in 1881 and enjoyed immediate success. Eight years later its Genevan owner decided to move it to the booming tourist town of Lucerne. So the 2-ton canvas went on a railway journey and was housed in a new Hittorf rotunda (Fig. 12) in the centre of the town, where it has stayed ever since – which is, in fact, a miracle. In 1925 the Genevan owner sold the panorama building (including the painting) to Franz Koch, a Lucerne transport contractor whose only interest was to transform the rotunda into a garage. Koch planned to throw the painting away. Nevertheless, on second thought he decided to keep it on display, having decided that there still might be a chance to make fairly good money with it.

But as he needed space for his buses and cars, the transport contractor split the rotunda horizontally in two, restricting the panorama to the first floor. As the painting no longer fitted the wall space available, he simply cut off 6 feet (2 metres) of the canvas at its upper edge. In 1949 the garage owner needed even more space and changed the rotunda once again – another 6 feet of canvas had to go. In total the Bourbaki painting lost one-third of its surface area.

But by now the interest in panoramas had faded. Fewer and fewer people came to see the 34,000 poor soldiers crossing the border at Les Verrières. The roof of the Lucerne rotunda started to crumble, incoming rain left damaged areas of canvas, and the painting itself began to show cracks. Was this the very end of the French army?

No. The Bourbakis were saved once more – this time by a student of history, Brigit Kämpfen-Klapproth. Her 1976 thesis about the Bourbaki Panorama's historical importance and alarming condition was picked up by the Swiss press and aroused sudden interest and concern. For the occasion of the panorama's hundredth anniversary in 1981, the Verein Erhaltung des Bourbaki Panoramas (Association for the Preservation of the Bourbaki Panorama) was founded. With the help of the City and Canton of Lucerne, as well as from donors all over Switzerland, the association managed to restore the rotunda and the painting. The panorama also acquired a new three-dimensional foreground with life-size figurines and other props, including a telephone pole and a railway wagon. The panorama reopened in 2000 and is today one of the main attractions for visitors to Lucerne.⁴

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4. For more information on the Bourbaki Panorama see Heinz Dieter Finck and Michael T. Ganz, *Le Panorama Bourbaki* (Besançon: Editions Cêtre, 2002) or the German edition of the same work, *Bourbaki Panorama* (Zürich: Werd Verlag, 2000). The Association for the Preservation of the Bourbaki Panorama has a website at www.bourbakipanorama.ch.



7-8. Einsiedeln Panorama: two details. The 'stonework' and 'rocks' in the foreground are three-dimensional faux terrain; all the figures, city and landscape are painted on the canvas.



9-11. Bourbaki Panorama – (top) detail of the canvas. The model telegraph wires just visible above the soldiers at left pass imperceptibly 'into' the two-dimensional painting. (middle) detail of the canvas. The nearest railway wagon is a three-dimensional model, while the rest of the train is painted; the junction between the faux terrain and the canvas is at the second break in the 'fence'. (bottom) the central viewing platform and the panorama canvas

12. Exterior of the Bourbaki Panorama. The original Hittorf rotunda is surrounded by a modern glass frontage housing a cinema, library, shops and restaurant.

