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A Failed Medievalism? The *Burgunderbeute* and Switzerland's Search for its Cultural Heritage



Fig. 11.1: View of the BHM from the Kirchenfeld Bridge, ca. 1927. Photo: ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Bildarchiv, PK_005791 (public domain).

In the summer of 1900, the Bern Historical Museum (BHM) was finally complete, a project that began almost seventy years earlier, when the city's Antiquarian Society took the initial strides to establish a purpose-built local museum (Fig. 11.1). The building had already opened its doors to the public in 1894, but it was not until the turn of the century that its annex galleries were constructed, its front lawn landscaped, and

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its main entrance revealed.¹ On 23 June 1900, the scaffolding covering the central portal was ceremoniously dismantled to expose a monumental glass mosaic, nine meters wide and six high, designed by Biel artist Léo-Paul Robert and manufactured by Neuchâtel-based British émigré Clement John Heaton (Fig. 11.2).² The mosaic soon became the face of the museum's branding and, in fact, its promotional capacity was predicted even before its completion; the year prior, the museum published a new collection guide featuring on its cover Robert's design for the in-progress mosaic.³



Fig. 11.2: Léo-Paul Robert (designer) and Clement John Heaton (manufacturer), Mosaic over the BHM main entrance, completed 1900. Photo: BHM, Bern/Christine Moor (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

¹ For a detailed chronology of the BHM's development as both building and institution, see Karl Zimmermann, "Chronikalische Notizen zur Museumsgeschichte: 100 Jahre Bernisches Historisches Museum, 1894–1994," *Berner Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Heimatkunde* 56, no. 3 (1994): 371–459. See also Zimmermann's study of the Bern Antiquarian Society, which was one of the precursors to the BHM: "Die Antiquarische Gesellschaft von Bern (1837–1858)," *Berner Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Heimatkunde* 54 (1992): 59–96. For a historical survey of the building, see Anne-Marie Biland, *Bernisches Historisches Museum Architekturführer* (Bern: Stämpfli, 1994).

² For a brief discussion of Robert's collaborations with Heaton (especially their work on the staircase of the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Neuchâtel), see Anne Ceresole, "The Work in Cloisonné of Clement John Heaton," *The Journal of the Decorative Arts Society, 1850–the Present* 20 (1996): 34–42.

³ *Führer durch das historische Museum in Bern* (Bern: K.J. Wyss, 1899).

The work's art nouveau style and symbolist content—an allegory of History and Poetry—were eagerly anticipated by the museum's building committee, but they were an abrupt departure from what had been planned over the preceding decades. The BHM's head architect, André Lambert, had originally envisioned a historicist fresco commemorating a decisive event in the development of Swiss history and identity.⁴ Given the museum's neo-Gothic exterior, it appears to have been self-evident that this scene would be drawn from the Middle Ages, during the purported glory days of the Old Swiss Confederation (Alte Eidgenossenschaft), when a group of eight cantons formed a pact to defend each other against their more powerful neighbors. In the nineteenth century, this alliance was commonly believed to be the precursor to the modern nation, which was formed in 1848 and had similarly defined itself against France and Germany.⁵

Following this logic, the BHM's building committee in the 1890s began soliciting drafts for the decoration of the main entrance from two prominent history and battle painters, Robert von Steiger and Gustav Adolf Karl Closs, both of whom fashioned watercolors celebrating the storied military triumphs of the medieval confederation.⁶ Most preferred was Closs's rendering of the 1476 Battle of Murten, the penultimate fight of the Burgundian Wars, when the Swiss in a surprising string of victories defeated Charles the Bold's far larger, better trained, and more equipped armies (Fig. 11.3). This draft soon fell out of favor, and Léo-Paul Robert, one of the artists on the building committee responsible for evaluating the suitability of Closs's design, was asked by the rest of the committee to take over the project himself.⁷ While the reasons for terminating Closs's contract were not stated in the meeting notes of the BHM's building committee, what is clear is that all parties involved were quickly taken by Robert's vision even though his desire for a mosaic rather than a fresco bloated the budget.⁸

4 Adolphe Tière was initially the architect responsible, after which Lambert took over. See Zimmermann, "Chronikalische Notizen," 377–78; Biland, *BHM Architekturführer*, 4–10.

5 On modern Switzerland's channeling of the medieval confederation in history and myth, see Guy P. Marchal, *Schweizer Gebrauchsgeschichte: Geschichtsbilder, Mythenbildung und nationale Identität* (Basel: Schwabe, 2007); Guy P. Marchal, "Medievalism, the Politics of Memory and Swiss National Identity," in *The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States: History, Nationhood and the Search for Origins*, ed. R.J.W. Evans and Guy P. Marchal (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 197–220; Oliver Zimmer, "Competing Memories of the Nation: Liberal Historians and the Reconstruction of the Swiss Past, 1870–1900," *Past & Present* 168 (2000): 194–226.

6 Robert von Steiger's proposal depicting the Battle of Laupen is still preserved at the BHM, Inv. Nr. H/51760. Von Steiger also produced a draft showing the foundation of the city of Bern, but it no longer survives; it is only mentioned in the protocol for the BHM's building committee: "Protokolle der Sitzungen des Bauausschusses für das Nationalmuseum, 1891–1898," Bern, Bern Historical Museum (hereafter cited as BHM), Direktionsarchiv, 1.3.2, 52 (entry for 19 September 1893). I am deeply grateful to Susan Marti for calling my attention to these meeting notes, as well as to Barbara Weber for graciously providing access.

7 Robert's initial draft is also at the BHM, Inv. Nr. H/51076.

8 As stated in a meeting of the building committee, "preference should be given to the best and most beautiful method." Biland, *BHM Architekturführer*, 19.



Fig. 11.3: Gustav Adolf Karl Closs, *Battle of Murten*, watercolor draft for the BHM's main entrance, ca. 1893, BHM, Inv. Nr. H/24223. Photo: BHM, Bern/Stefan Rebsamen (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

The sudden pivot away from Closs's *Battle of Murten* was also a choice against the collecting practices that had undergirded Bern's museum and cultural landscape since the 1830s, when the idea to form a purpose-built local museum began to materialize and the first steps were made to assemble a suitable collection. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the parameters of the collection regularly shifted and became increasingly capacious—at the time of the museum's opening in 1894, it contained a broad array of artworks spanning archaeological fragments, sculpture, and ethnographica—but one thing agreed upon since the beginning was that the core of the collection was to be medieval. The keystone of that programmatic choice was the so-called *Burgunderbeute* or "Burgundian booty," a vast group of sumptuous treasures that Swiss soldiers had looted from Burgundian tents after a string of victories at the Battles of Grandson and Murten in 1476. Ranging from cannons and hand weaponry through goldsmith works and jewelry to tapestries and banners, each work came to be considered a historical and art-historical unicum, since hardly any courtly Burgundian works otherwise survived the French Revolution; the status of the objects from the *Burgunderbeute* as loot paradoxically preserved them for posterity.

It was largely because of these works that the museum even came into existence. At stake in their preservation and display was not just the establishment of a quality collection, but the enshrining of a nascent national identity. With the formation of a unified, trilingual state in 1848 came a certain amount of discord regarding what constituted Swiss identity and cultural heritage.⁹ The matter became especially visible in the debates about the new country's plans for a national museum, since it was unclear both where to build it as well as with what kinds of objects to fill it. What began as widespread feelings of uncertainty, and at times apathy, soon evolved into a bitter competition, with cities across Switzerland—mainly Basel, Bern, Lucerne, and Zurich—asserting that the objects in their possession emblemized the larger population.¹⁰ To best their competitors, the Bernese, rather than merely claiming their right to house the national museum because their city was the capital, tapped into the symbolic potential of the *Burgunderbeute*. In fact, they were so confident in their case that they began planning their building before parliament had even reached a decision about where to build.¹¹ In the end, perhaps to curb Bern's political power, the Federal Assembly's upper and lower chambers voted Zurich as the location of the future national museum; Bern's in-progress structure was demoted and renamed to today's Bern Historical Museum.¹² Despite this defeat, the *Burgunderbeute* was still installed as it had been planned from the beginning, when the structure was supposed to house the national collection. When the building opened in 1894, the works occupied a series of Burgundian-themed galleries on the museum's lavishly fenestrated *piano nobile* (Fig. 11.4), whose towering dimensions are believed to have been purpose-built for displaying the millefleur tapestries with Burgundian heraldry that had been taken by the Swiss in the fifteenth century.¹³

The curious choice of Robert's allegorical mosaic for the museum's main entrance and advertising campaign may have been an attempt at rebranding after the lost bid for the national museum, but the decision's sudden and seemingly arbitrary nature also suggests a certain degree of avoidance after the decades spent planning and investing in the *Burgunderbeute*'s centrality. What exactly did this set of objects come to represent and how and why could a well-established culture of medievalism (including medievalism's modernisms) be so quickly replaced by the meta-narratives of art nouveau symbolism? This essay seeks to trace the slow rise and sudden fall of the *Burgunderbeute* as a cultural, patrimonial, and nationalist symbol. In order to recog-

9 Modern Switzerland's fourth national language, Romansh, was not recognized in the 1848 constitution; it was added in subsequent revisions.

10 Tommy Sturzenegger, *Der grosse Streit: Wie das Landesmuseum nach Zürich kam* (Zurich: Verlag Hans Rohr, 1999), 91–114.

11 Sturzenegger, *Grosse Streit*, 100–104; Zimmermann, "Chronikalische Notizen," 374–78.

12 Sturzenegger, *Grosse Streit*, 63–80, 177–80.

13 Susan Marti, "Erobertes Gut: Die neue Dauerausstellung im Bernischen Historischen Museum," *Podium* 2 (2012): 11–12.



Fig. 11.4: Burgundian Gallery in the BHM, ca. 1905, BHM, neg. 2185. Photo: BHM, Bern (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

nize the weight of these shifts, it is necessary to take a *longue durée* approach that accounts for what these artworks were and how they were defined through time. As we shall see, already in the Middle Ages these looted artworks constituted a highly variable and constantly shifting group and they remained such into the early modern period. The idea that these heterogeneous fragments had anything in common—let alone belonged in Switzerland—was in many ways an invention of the decades flanking Swiss unification in the mid-nineteenth century, when politicians, professors, and collectors alike were eager to find a group of objects into which they could retroactively read a cultural origin story. The ultimate failure of such nationalistic mythmaking, we might say, had little to do with the works themselves or their historical context and was more likely based upon a new kind of consciousness that medieval artworks were perhaps inadequate symbols for expressing purportedly modern ideals at the turn of the twentieth century.

A Brief History of the *Burgunderbeute*

Among the earliest images showing the Swiss victories in the Burgundian Wars are those in Diebold Schilling the Elder's *Berner Chronik* (Bern Chronicle), a three-volume illustrated work documenting the history of Bern from its foundation until the time of the set's completion in 1484.¹⁴ While the first two volumes were based on already extant city chronicles, the third and by far the most richly illustrated volume brings to life Schilling's own eyewitness account of the wars, which he observed while traveling with Swiss troops to their victories at Héricourt, Grandson, Murten, and Nancy.¹⁵ After a series of bloody battle scenes accompanied by descriptions of the confederates' innovative martial tactics, the reader arrives at an image showing the aftermath of the Battle of Grandson on 2 March 1476, when the Swiss entered Charles the Bold's abandoned camp to find a cluster of sumptuously embroidered tents bearing the duke's heraldry (Fig. 11.5). As was customary at the time, the soldiers stayed on site for three days to bury the dead and to collect their booty; in the process, they discovered a trove of treasures that, according to Schilling, was so heavy they almost did not want to claim it as their own anymore.¹⁶ Later that year, when the confederates defeated Charles's army yet again at Murten on 22 June, they discovered just how successful their earlier pillaging had been; hardly any riches remained at camp, but the Swiss stayed again for three days to extract all that they could from the reserves of food, wine, and animals.¹⁷

14 There are a number of related manuscripts produced by Diebold Schilling the Elder and his nephew, Diebold Schilling the Younger. Schilling the Elder's *Spiezer Chronik* from 1484 or 1485 remains unfinished and does not include the Burgundian Wars (Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Mss.h.h.1.15); Schilling the Elder's 1481–84 (?) *Grosse Burgunderchronik*, sometimes also called the *Zürcher Schilling*, is closely related to the third volume of his *Berner Chronik* (Zentralbibliothek Zürich, MS A 5); Schilling the Younger's 1511–13 *Luzerner Chronik* includes significant passages about the Burgundian Wars and the *Burgunderbeute*, since some of the spoils were on display in the city around the time of the manuscript's creation (Lucerne, Korporation Luzern, S 23 fol.).

15 All three volumes are now kept in Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Mss.h.h.1.1–3. For a brief bibliography on the third volume, on which my discussion will focus, see Josef Zemp, *Die schweizerischen Bilderchroniken und ihre Architektur-Darstellungen* (Zurich: F. Schulthess, 1897), 60–70; Walter Muschg and Eduard Achilles Gessler, *Die Schweizer Bilderchroniken des 15./16. Jahrhunderts* (Zurich: Atlantis-Verlag, 1941), 165–72; Gustav Tobler, ed., *Die Berner Chronik des Diebold Schilling, 1468–1484*, 2 vols. (Bern: K.J. Wyss, 1897–1901), 2: 331–50.

16 Walter Schaufelberger, *Der Alte Schweizer und sein Krieg: Studien zur Kriegsführung vornehmlich im 15. Jahrhundert* (Zurich: Europa Verlag, 1952), 240n18. See also Florens Deuchler, *Die Burgunderbeute: Inventar der Beutestücke aus den Schlachten von Grandson, Murten und Nancy, 1476/1477* (Bern: Stämpfli, 1963), 15–18.

17 Schaufelberger, *Alte Schweizer*, 240n18; Deuchler, *Burgunderbeute*, 19–22.



Fig. 11.5: Swiss troops entering an abandoned Burgundian camp at Grandson, from Diebold Schilling the Elder's *Amtliche Berner Chronik*, vol. 3, 1478–83, Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Mss.h.h.I.3, p. 654. Photo: <https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/bbb/Mss-hh-I0003>.

Out of the 277 watercolors in Schilling's third volume, there are only a handful of passing glimpses of the artworks plundered. Charles the Bold's treasury tent is shown as perched atop a hill as an architectural reliquary of sorts, from which silver and gilt vessels are taken and packed into wooden boxes for transport to Lucerne, where the booty was to be sorted, documented, and appraised (Fig. 11.6). The topographical prominence of Charles's tent, however, belies the visibility of its contents. The number of soldiers and containers far outweighs the number of objects depicted, perhaps an indication that of paramount importance was not the nature of things discovered, but rather the fact that they were now things possessed. The only illustration in Schilling's chronicle that actually shows objects being preserved or celebrated is the one that depicts the looted Burgundian flags ceremoniously brought from Grandson to Bern Minster (Fig. 11.7). Yet here again, it seems that they were not valued for their objecthood or status as trophies. Given the overlaps between heraldry, office, and personhood, these banners most likely were understood as a substitute for the conquered



Fig. 11.6: Swiss troops looting Charles the Bold's tent at Grandson, from Diebold Schilling the Elder's *Amtliche Berner Chronik*, vol. 3, 1478–83, Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Mss.h.h.I.3, p. 774. Photo: <https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/bbb/Mss-hh-I0003>.



Fig. 11.7: Bernese carrying Burgundian flags into the Bern Minster, from Diebold Schilling the Elder's *Amtliche Berner Chronik*, vol. 3, 1478–83, Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Mss.h.h.I.3, p. 829. Photo: <https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/bbb/Mss-hh-I0003>.

military leaders.¹⁸ In choosing to depict the heraldic flags here as raised and flying, a common trope throughout the manuscript to identify the parties entering battle scenes, Schilling thus seems to advance the notion that Swiss soldiers were now the arbiters of Burgundy's new identity.

Already in the fifteenth century, it was relatively unclear what the cultural, historical, artistic, or monetary values of the Burgundian spoils were. In many ways, these systems of value were in conflict, at least according to our modern perspective. The items that the confederates were primarily interested in keeping were the banners, artillery, and other kinds of military paraphernalia that indexed Burgundy's defeat. Yet this collection did not remain intact and was dispersed across the confederation; Bern received the majority of the objects and placed them in the armory and minster.¹⁹ Also included in this category, it is believed, were the millefleur tapestries, perhaps because of the prominent placement of the arms of Charles's predecessor, Philip the Good,

¹⁸ Regula Schmid, "Fahnergeschichten: Erinnern in der spätmittelalterlichen Gemeinde," *Traverse: Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 6 (1999): 39–48; Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 62–83.

¹⁹ Most important to note here is that the spoils of Murten went to Basel: Deuchler, *Burgunderbeute*, 29–32; Rudolf Wackernagel, "Basels Anteil an der Burgunderbeute," *Basler Jahrbuch* (1894): 57–68.



Fig. 11.8: Parts of the *Burgunderbeute* on display in Lucerne, from Diebold Schilling the Younger's *Luzerner Chronik*, 1513, Luzern, Korporation Luzern, S 23 fol., p. 202. Photo: <https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/kol/S0023-2>.

throughout the foliage.²⁰ Gold and silver works, jewels, and vestments were prized only for their profitability; most were immediately transported to a storehouse in Lucerne to await their sale, the proceeds of which would in turn pay the soldiers for their services.²¹ The anticipated monetary value of these works was so great that it was detrimental to their preservation. Following a common pattern in medieval warfare, artworks were disassembled and textiles were cut into smaller pieces to ease their transport, to split among different members of the confederation, and to produce more wares to sell.²² One of the more famous images of the *Burgunderbeute* from Diebold Schilling the Younger's *Luzerner Chronik* (Lucerne Chronicle) shows a rather heterogenous grouping in a chamber of a tower along the city's fortifications. While this image at first glance seems

²⁰ Anna Rapp Buri and Monica Stucky-Schürer, "Die burgundischen Tapisserien in Bern: 'nicht nur der Touristenwelt einen berühmten Genuss gewähren, sondern auch die Berner Herzen zu edler Gesinnung und That erheben,'" *Kunst + Architektur in der Schweiz* 53 (2002): 26–35, at 27.

²¹ Deuchler, *Burgunderbeute*, 23–24, 59–61, 75–91.

²² Deuchler, *Burgunderbeute*, 28–44.

to celebrate things collected, it in fact commemorates them before their impending dispersal on the market (Fig. 11.8). Drawing on the visual rhetoric of church treasury inventories, which in their accumulation represented liquid capital that could be relied on in times of need, the *Burgunderbeute* here might be understood to function similarly: as a collection whose value would ultimately be distributed to facilitate the common good.²³

Excitement surrounding the weapons, flags, and tapestries on view in Bern's armory and minster quickly started to wane, as evidenced by the sudden paucity of written or visual sources that attest to their placement or display after the Reformation. Between 1537 and 1539, the objects from the Burgundian Wars remaining in the minster that had not been melted, sold, or transferred elsewhere were packed in boxes and put in the town hall, where they were combined with other groups of looted objects, namely the textiles from the treasuries of Königsfelden Abbey and Lausanne Cathedral, which had been sacked by the Bernese during the Reformation.²⁴ Over the next 250 years or so, our only source of knowledge for the looted objects' status is a small handful of inventories and seventeenth-century catalogues of heraldry, flags, and banners (*Fahnenbücher*).²⁵ Most of the inventories evidence a change in location from one attic to another, rather than a change in the status of the objects' visibility or display. The tapestries' whereabouts are certainly the best documented; they are known to have gone from the town hall back to the minster (though stored in the sacristy) and from there to the newly founded library.²⁶ In the case of the flags, the textual record came to stand in for the objects themselves, with the *Fahnenbücher* produced to document and memorialize a group of objects that could not be on view because they had virtually disintegrated.²⁷

23 Lucas Burkart, "Schatz und Schatzbildung: Reflexionen zu disziplinärem Interesse und interdisziplinärem Zugang," in *Le trésor au Moyen Âge: Questions et perspectives de recherche*, ed. Lucas Burkart et al. (Neuchâtel: Institut d'Histoire de l'art et de Muséologie, 2005), 1–26, at 2–11. See also the editors' introduction for the same volume, vii–x.

24 Paul Hofer, *Die Kunstdenkmäler des Kantons Bern, Band 3: Die Staatsbauten der Stadt Bern* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1947), 172.

25 The main sources relied upon in the secondary literature are the Bern armory's 1687 inventory and the minster's inventory of 1795, both of which have been transcribed: Rudolf Wegeli, *Das Berner Zeughausinventar von 1687* (Bern: K.J. Wyss, 1939); Jakob Stammler, *Der Domschatz von Lausanne und seine Ueberreste: zugleich eine Untersuchung über den ältern Bestand des historischen Museums in Bern* (Bern: Nydegger & Baumgart, 1894), 90–92.

26 On the status of the objects at the town hall: Quirinus Reichen, "Fundstücke: Vom Rathaus ins Museum: Altertümer des Staates und Staatsaltertümer," *Berner Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 79, no. 3 (2017): 112–27; A. Zesiger, "Der Burgunderkrieg im bernischen Rathaus," *Blätter für bernische Geschichte, Kunst und Altertumskunde* 22, no. 3–4 (1926): 169–78. On the tapestries, see Rapp Buri and Stucky-Schürer, "Die burgundischen Tapissereien," 29–30.

27 A survey of flags from the *Burgunderbeute* was undertaken for a 1969 exhibition at the BHM: *Die Burgunderbeute und Werke Burgundischer Hofkunst* (Bern: Stämpfli, 1969), 94–166. For a broader discussion of Swiss flags, heraldry, and their documentation in so-called *Fahnenbücher*, see Albert Bruckner and Berty Bruckner, *Schweizer Fahnenbuch* (St. Gallen: Zollikofer, 1942).



Fig. 11.9: Johannes Dünz, *Group Portrait of Bern's Library Committee*, 1696, Bern, Burgerbibliothek, M.11. Photo: Bern, Burgerbibliothek.

It was only at the turn of the eighteenth century that any of the scattered artworks of the Burgundian Wars took on any cultural significance, this time in the context of Bern's early Enlightenment milieu (Fig. 11.9). In Johannes Dünz's group portrait of the city's newly formed library committee, the intellectual leaders of the city sit around a table decked with a lustrous blue cloth embroidered with the signature Burgundian wisps of flames and arms.²⁸ Staged within the city's *Kunstkammer*-turned-library, the painting functions much like the room itself by presenting the viewer with incongruous

²⁸ Depicted in the painting is the commission overseeing what was then an educational library for the university (*Bibliothek der Hohen Schule*), which, as suggested from the objects in the portrait, also doubled as a *Wunder-* and *Kunstkammer* after receiving foundational gifts from the doctor Wilhelm Fabry. In 1951, the Burgerbibliothek Bern was established, which became the repository for most of the surviving manuscripts and special collections of this original library, including Dünz's painting. Brief chronologies of these two institutions are provided in: Susanna Tschui, "Burgerbibliothek Bern," in *Handbuch der historischen Buchbestände in der Schweiz*, ed. Zentralbibliothek Zürich (Zurich: Olms-Weidmann, 2011), 193–97; Claudia Engler, "Zentralbibliothek der Universitätsbibliothek Bern," in *Handbuch der historischen Buchbestände*, ed. Zentralbibliothek Zürich, 240–61. On the status of the library as *Kunstkammer*, see Susanne Ritter-Lutz, "Die bernische Kunstkammer im 18. Jahrhundert," in *Sammeln und Sammlungen im 18. Jahrhundert in der Schweiz*, ed. Benno Schubiger, Dorothea Schwinn Schürmann, and Cecilia Hurley (Geneva: Slatkine, 2007), 47–66. A brief historical contextualization of this painting is provided by Claudia Engler, "Albrecht von Haller as Librarian: Searching and Finding in the Universe of Books," in *Scholars in Action: The Practice of Knowledge and the Figure of the Savant in the 18th Century*, ed. André Holenstein, Hubert Steinke, and Martin Stuber (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 253–65, at 255–57.

objects and epistemological tensions in need of resolve: the relationship between local and global, art and knowledge, secular and religious power. The sitters' arrangement around the table—recalling both Dutch group portraits and Last Supper scenes—seems to probe the relationship between Bern's Protestant patricians and their city's Catholic (i.e., Burgundian) past. What appears at first as a rather enigmatic painting, however, starts to come into order through the table's tapestry. Given the lack of written sources and inventories from the time, it is impossible to tell whether the library actually possessed the depicted textile, but that might not matter all that much. The painting's veracity comes not from truthful depictions, but from the way in which objects of material culture support and reify the social and intellectual culture being ordered within the room. Negotiations in the early modern period often occurred around a table and, in the process, the logic of power that undergirded such negotiations was also exposed and laid open: put "on the table," so to speak.²⁹ The tapestry and the Burgundian context from which it came, then, support the discourses of knowledge represented by the large red book scaled larger than the heads of the sitters; the textile is a fictive fragment from the past that calls into relief how medieval bonds formed by military supremacy had been superseded by an early Enlightenment ideology that exercised its power through books and education.

The Search for National Symbols

The second quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the formation of the mythos of the *Burgunderbeute* as a distinct group of objects with material, artistic, and above all political resonances, but not for the reasons one might initially expect. Unlike the Enlightenment rhetoric of Dünz's painting, which situated the role of Burgundian victories as the beginning of a narrative of hegemony and progress, the common feeling among Bern's patrician leaders after the turn of the century was one of anxiety and inadequacy. In 1837, when the first strides were made to form an Antiquarian Society and museum, the eponymous committee expressed concern that they were extremely behind in doing so, both among the Swiss cities and on the world stage. Their goal was to create a small museum in a gallery space on the upper floors of the former church of the Hospital Brothers of St. Anthony that would function "to instruct, benefit, and honor the whole country" as well as to preserve objects that were scattered across the country and showed the effects of centuries of neglect. The act of safekeeping material culture was also framed as a patriotic duty, since not doing so endan-

29 Sasha Rossman, "On Neutral Grounds: Gerard Ter Borch's *The Swearing of the Oath of Ratification of the Treaty of Münster, 15 May 1648*," in *Le fond de l'oeuvre: Arts visuels et sécularisation à l'époque moderne*, ed. Émilie Chedeville, Étienne Jollet, and Claire Sourdin (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2020), 153–77.

gered the present. One of the most looming threats expressed by committee members was the greed of Swiss art dealers, who sold their objects to “foreign art-lovers” and in the process “lost their fatherland.”³⁰

Despite the Antiquarian Society’s success in courting donors to make substantial gifts to build the collection, the museum failed to attract public attention or sustained governmental support. In the fall of 1843, Bern’s city council, which owned the building and rented it out, voted to sell the building and terminate the society’s lease, an event that brought to the surface underlying feelings and suppressed biases about why a local museum was culturally necessary. In an urgent petition to the city council to keep their exhibition space, the society’s president Johann Anton von Tillier described cultural heritage as under a siege that needed to be fought with “the remaining remnants, particularly the beautiful weapons, with which our forefathers most gloriously fought and won our independence.” More alarmingly, he attempted to rally council support by blaming Bern’s Jewish population, which according to him had begun in the last few years to buy up antiquities across the cantons in order to sell them to enrich themselves and collections abroad at the expense of the “fatherland.”³¹ Such scapegoating was its own kind of tired medievalism, since after the *Burgunderbeute* objects were taken from Grandson in 1476, various court documents villainized members of society’s purported margins who were believed to have stolen treasures from wagons en route to their appraisal.³² Tillier almost certainly was aware of the historical (mi)stakes of his message, having written multiple monographs on the history of the Old and New Confederations. If we are to correct his rhetoric, it seems that the biggest threat against the defined “fatherland” came primarily from within. Much like in the fifteenth century, when the *Burgunderbeute* was seen by the victorious as a means of compensation and profit, preservation of artworks for the nineteenth-century men in power was forgone in favor of the bottom line.

After Swiss unification in 1848 and the naming of Bern as the capital, the plans for a museum were still at a standstill and the city turned its attention to a new mode of display: the festival procession, the focus of which was the promotion of the *Burgunderbeute* as the city’s and nation’s new cultural symbol. The objects were still scattered and mostly hidden across various locations in Bern and elsewhere; in 1853, the citizens brought together all objects believed to have been taken in the Burgundian Wars for a grand national celebration taking place over two days on the anniversaries of the Battles of Laupen (21 June 1339) and Murten (22 June 1476). Documented by a book of textual commentaries as well as a lavishly illustrated picture book (*Festalbum*), the procession and its memorialization in text and image were intended to be a decisive statement that the nation’s day of celebration should not be the obvious choices of 1 August (the day of the advent of the modern nation) or 6 March (when

30 Zimmermann, “Die Antiquarische Gesellschaft,” 60–62.

31 Zimmermann, “Die Antiquarische Gesellschaft,” 70–73.

32 Deuchler, *Burgunderbeute*, 29–44, at 30.

Bern joined the Old Swiss Confederation in 1353), but instead in June on the days of two medieval military victories (Fig. 11.10).³³



Fig. 11.10: Heinrich Jenny (illustrator) and Kümmerly and Wittmer (printer), *Triumphal Wagon with Charles the Bold's Tent* from Ludwig Stantz, *Festalbum*, 1855. Photo: Universitätsbibliothek J.C. Senckenberg Frankfurt am Main [2018]; urn:nbn:de:hebis:30:4-101850.

Such nation-building events were fairly common in mid-nineteenth-century Europe, but they carried a particular weight for the Swiss.³⁴ Not only was there no national museum or institution in the country's capital where citizens could connect with their past, but there was also a widespread belief that "Swissness" was a feeling or spirit that needed to be enacted and perhaps practiced. Unlike other European nations that could

³³ The *Festalbum* was produced in color, with illustrations by Heinrich Jenny: Ludwig Stantz, ed., *Festalbum der Feier des Eintritts Berns in den Schweizerbund, 6. März 1353, begangen im Jahr 1853 an den Siegestagen v. Laupen u. Murten, 21. Jun. 1339 und 22. Jun. 1476* (Bern: Stämpfli, 1855). There was also a smaller, cheaper, black-and-white version: *Panorama des historischen Festzuges der Eintrittsfeier Berns in den Schweizerbund 1853* (Bern: Lithographie Kümmerly & Wittmer, 1853). The textual commentary, *Beschreibung des Bundesfestes, gefeiert zum Andenken an den Eintritt Berns in den Schweizerbund den 21. und 22. Brachmonat 1853* (Bern: Haller, 1853), provides a detailed, eyewitness account of the events of 1853.

³⁴ For a list of different festivals in Switzerland, see Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer, *Feste und Bräuche des Schweizervolkes: Kleines Handbuch des schweizerischen Volksbrauchs der Gegenwart in gemeinfasslicher Darstellung* (Zurich: Schulthess & Co., 1913), 82–83.

conjure concrete architectural, material, and dynastic evidence to illustrate their resurgent power, Switzerland's identity as a politically fragmented and linguistically diverse confederation-turned-nation had always been more fashioned than built. For that reason, a performance was an ideal medium to reify the camaraderie and bonds of the past.³⁵ It was not just any performance that could communicate cultural sentiments to the masses, but festivals and processions in particular, since it was believed that their "popular" nature made them distinctly Swiss. Most other cultural signifiers, such as literature, theater, and opera, were imports from France, Italy, Germany, and Austria. Especially in the German-speaking parts of Switzerland, there was nothing perceived as high culture in their dialect, so they had to make their own.³⁶

As implied by the *Festalbum's* introduction, the event was meant to remedy these perceived shortcomings by articulating the type of medieval culture that needed to be recovered, performed, and celebrated: a Switzerland with a shared history of military prowess that became united through fighting against its common enemies. The Old Swiss Confederation, the authors stated, was "a contract of protection and defense between friends against foes . . . a martial alliance, an alliance of arms" (*ein kriegerischer Bund, ein Waffenbund*). This ideal union from the past was also decidedly populist: a group of rogue but united soldiers who condemned the "hate" of the Hapsburgs at Laupen and who conquered against all odds the "tyrannical lusts of Burgundy" at Murten.³⁷ Fitting with this introduction, the accompanying sixty lithographs designed by Ludwig Stantz and Heinrich Jenny show contemporary citizens from across the canton bringing to life this version of the past. They wear costumes modeled after the watercolors in Schilling the Elder's *Berner Chronik* and carry pieces of the *Burgunderbeute* on floats and in their hands.³⁸ The grand finale was a "triumphal wagon" of the objects taken from Charles the Bold, whose plundered tent was recreated with Burgundian tapestries and adorned with tattered banners and a suit of plate armor (see Fig. 11.10). Not insignificantly, such historical artworks were scaled smaller and in washed-out colors. Jenny's focus is not so much the display of the past, but rather the function of the past as a prop for the present and future, as evidenced by the group of young boys taking the tools of history into their own hands and leading the way. The professed goal of this arrangement, according to the album's introduction, was to give

35 Marchal, "Medievalism," 206–10; Daniel Schläppi, "Zwischen Familiensinn und Kriegsrausch: Institutionen aus ständischer Zeit als Generatoren moderner männlicher Gefühlslagen," *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 39, no. 1 (2012): 37–63, at 47–54.

36 Richard R. Ruppel, "Performing Swiss Heimat: Zu Geschichte und Funktion des traditionellen Bundesfeierspiels," in *Schweiz schreiben: Zu Konstruktion und Dekonstruktion des Mythos Schweiz in der Gegenwartsliteratur*, ed. Jürgen Barkhoff and Valerie Heffernan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 159–76, at 159–62.

37 Stantz, *Festalbum*, 2.

38 The description of the part of the procession devoted to the Battle of Murten mentions specifically the *Berner Chronik* as a source of inspiration; Stantz, *Festalbum*, 4–5.

birth to a “family drama of the fatherland” that allowed spectators to see their ancestors, their “sons of the Alps,” and themselves simultaneously. It produced an event that, through the “remembering of a great, vanished past” could fill “all hearts with great excitement” about their new nation.³⁹

The Bernese of the new capital may have overplayed their cards by so baldly claiming that they held the tools for unifying the nation. Soon after the festival took place, a new group of objects began to compete with the *Burgunderbeute* as cultural emblems. In the 1850s and 1860s, amidst the urbanization of the shores of the nearby lakes of Neuchâtel, Biel, and Murten, archaeologists began uncovering evidence of innovative forms of Iron and Bronze Age pile dwellings (*Pfahlbauten*, *palafittes*) that once sat above the surface of the water (Fig. 11.11).⁴⁰



Fig. 11.11: Rodolphe Auguste Bachelin, *Phoenicians and Pile Dwellers Bartering before a Willow Grove*, 1867, Zurich, Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum, LM-30487. Photo: Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum.

³⁹ Stantz, *Festalbum*, 1. The German texts refer to “ein Erinnerungsfest an eine dahingeschwundene, grosse Vergangenheit” and “einen Auftritt, der alle Herzen mit hoher Begeisterung erfüllte.”

⁴⁰ A good *longue durée* perspective on the history of excavations at such sites is provided by Pierre Crotti, Carmen Buchiller, and Gilbert Kaenel, eds., *Les Lacustres: 150 ans d'archéologie entre Vaud et Fribourg* (Lausanne: Musée cantonal d'archéologie et d'histoire, 2004). See also Andrea Bachmann and Ursula Hügi, eds., *Die Pfahlbauer: 150 Objekte erzählen 150 Geschichten* (Zurich: Swiss National Museum, 2004). For a shorter discussion in English, see A. P. Fitzpatrick, “The Finds from La Tène in the British Museum,” *The Antiquities Journal* 98 (2018): 43–80.

Ferdinand Keller, an archaeologist and founder of Zurich's Antiquarian Society, (mis) ordered the fragments by producing reconstructions based on recently contemporary settlements in New Guinea—a typical denial of the coeval nature of world history—and other archaeologists and collectors began buying up the fragments for private collections since there was no national museum to house them.⁴¹ They eventually became so popular that they were sent to the Paris World's Fair of 1867, where Swiss collectors like Friedrich Schwab exhibited not only actual fragments, but also paintings by Rodolphe-Auguste Bachelin to help contextualize and mythologize them.⁴² On the one hand, the tools' arrangement as trophies in Schwab's accompanying brochure indicated their status as a corollary of, if not a replacement for, the *Burgunderbeute* (Fig. 11.12). On the other hand, their romantic adaptation in painting also conveyed something that the medieval spoils could not: a Swiss origin story that was not militaristic.⁴³ Bachelin's landscape scene employed a radical foregrounding to stage an encounter between the so-called *Urhelvetier* (primordial Helvetians) who lived in the floating dwellings and the Phoenicians. Unlike the Old Swiss Confederation that fought against outsiders, here the viewer could witness the ancient, mythical beginnings of a Switzerland known for its neutrality, measured diplomacy, and economic innovation.

Around 1880, as plans for a national museum again started to gain momentum, the archaeological fragments of the pile dwellings were among the only objects that everyone across the country could agree were shared patrimony. The city of Bern, with its eyes set on being the location of the future museum, attempted to supplement the premodern *Burgunderbeute* with its prehistoric counterpart by courting local collector Friederich Bürki, but to no avail; Bürki died midway through negotiations and his heirs sold his archaeological collection at an auction in Basel in 1881. This event, like the failure of the Antiquarian Society some decades prior, caused widespread panic about the loss of cultural heritage. Two years later, Salomon Vögelin, professor of art history in Zurich and a member of the National Council, declared to the council

41 An image of Keller's reconstruction is in his "Die keltischen Pfahlbauten in den Schweizerseen," *Mittheilungen der antiquarischen Gesellschaft in Zürich* 9, no. 3 (1854): 65–101, at Plate 1, fig. 4. On the denial of the coeval and the notion of the "ethnographic present," see Paola Ivanov, "Rethinking Coevalness: Entangled History and the Objects of Ethnological Museums," in *Art/Histories in Transcultural Dynamics: Narratives, Concepts, and Practices at Work, 20th and 21st Centuries*, ed. Pauline Bachmann et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 47–69.

42 J. Häuselmann, *Antiquarium oder Zehn photographirte Tafeln mit deutschem und französischem Text. Copieen der aus dem Museum Schwab in Biel von dessen Gründer an die Pariser Ausstellung von 1867 gesandten, in den Pfahlbauten der Schweiz aufgefundenen Gegenstände* (Biel: Häuselmann, 1867). For a brief contextualization of these photographs, see Fitzpatrick, "Finds," 59–60.

43 On the romantic use of these objects, see Hans-Georg von Arburg, "Nation aus dem Sumpf: Pfahlbauergeschichten oder literarische Konstruktionen eines anderen 'Mythos Schweiz,'" in *Schweiz schreiben*, ed. Barkhoff and Heffernan, 117–37. On the status of fragments belonging to, and in fact engendering, art-historical discourses, see Ulrich Pfisterer, "Altamira – oder: Die Anfänge von Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft," in *Vorträge aus dem Warburg-Haus* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007), 10:13–80.

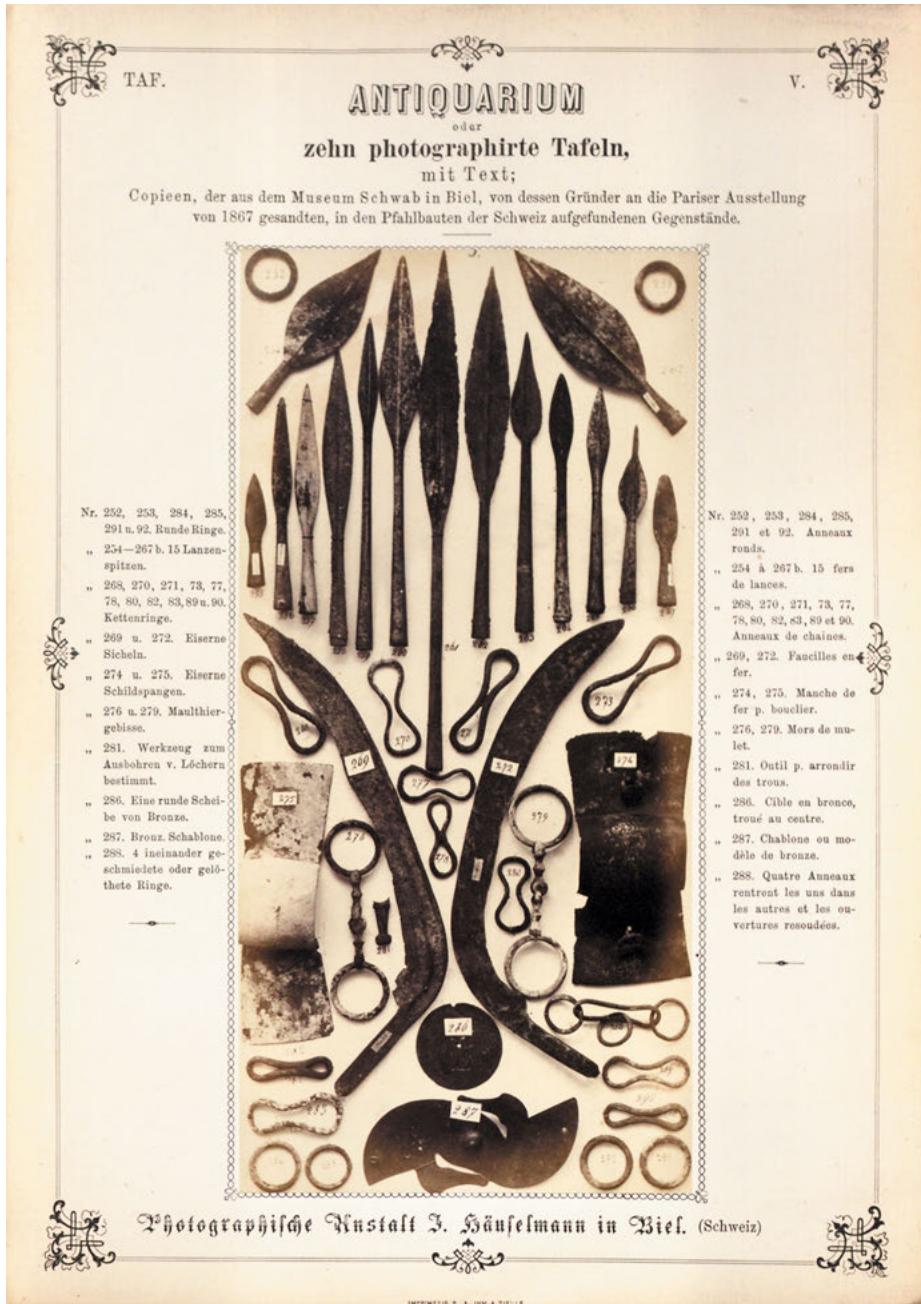


Fig. 11.12: Copies of Iron and Bronze Age tools in the collection of Friedrich Schwab; from J. Häuselmann, *Antiquarium*, 1867. Photo: Courtesy of Smithsonian Libraries and Archives (public domain).

in a widely reported speech that it was the “last hour” for forming a museum, although he acknowledged that it was a highly delicate issue to determine where it should be and what it should house.⁴⁴ The following year, the Federal Council itself made moves to acquire the renowned pile dwelling collection of archaeologist Victor Gross; the implication was that they could not lose yet another collection to the art market and that they would eventually bequeath it to whichever city built the national museum.⁴⁵ Most strikingly, and seldom mentioned, is that the main justification for their acquisition of Gross’s collection was based on the pseudoscientific fallacy that Swiss supremacy could be biologically substantiated. In a report of the Federal Council’s meeting on 25 November 1884, the value of the prehistoric skulls in Gross’s possession was characterized by a quotation from Rudolf Virchow, who was one of the fathers of modern pathology and who the year before wrote the preface to the catalogue of Gross’s collection. Gross’s skulls were seen to be “the flesh of our flesh and the blood of our blood.” He continued: “the magnificent skulls found at Auvernier can be shown with honor among the skulls of the cultured peoples” since, in “their form and the details of their formation, they locate themselves alongside the best skulls of the Aryan race.”⁴⁶

In practice, such pseudoscientific thought at the federal level was ultimately as bankrupt as Bern’s attempt to be the inheritor of the Old Confederation; neither provided any substantial justifications for where the national museum should go or why. Bern continued to act as if it were the *de facto* choice because of the *Burgunderbeute* and because of its status as seat of the parliament. Throughout the 1880s and into the early 1890s, the city made significant strides to secure funds and land, establish an advisory board for the Swiss National Museum in Bern, and promote its initiatives by advertising a public competition for architects to submit design proposals for the future museum located in Kirchenfeld, just across the bridge from the medieval city center.⁴⁷ In 1890, after the federal government finally put the establishment of the national museum into legislation, an intense competition ensued between Basel, Lucerne, Bern, and Zurich, the last of which was the main contender against Bern because of its savvy self-

44 Sturzenegger, *Grosse Streit*, 37–38; Zimmermann, “Antiquarische Gesellschaft,” 90–91; Zimmermann, “Chronikalische Notizen,” 371–73.

45 For a brief overview of the Gross acquisition, see Zimmermann, “Chronikalische Notizen,” 373–74 and Sturzenegger, *Grosse Streit*, 40–43. A more substantive discussion, particularly as the collection pertained to national identity, is provided by Karl Zimmermann, “Pfahlbauromantik im Bundeshaus: der Ankauf der ‘Pfahlbausammlung’ von Dr. Victor Gross durch die Eidgenossenschaft im Jahre 1884 und die Frage der Gründung eines schweizerischen National- oder Landesmuseum,” *Berner Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Heimatkunde* 49 (1987): 117–51.

46 Rudolf Virchow, “Preface,” in Victor Gross, *Les Protohelvètes ou les premiers colons sur les bords des lacs Bièvre et de Neuchâtel* (Berlin: A. Asher, 1883), v–vii.

47 Zimmermann, “Chronikalische Notizen,” 377–78.

promotion and because it had hosted the Swiss National Exhibition in 1883.⁴⁸ The debates also spilled out into the public forum, with the largest anti-Bern voice in the newspapers being the collector Heinrich Angst, who would eventually become the director of the Swiss National Museum in Zurich. In addition to extolling the strengths of the Zurich collection and its pedagogical merits for the students of the city's vocational schools, he also questioned whether Bern's collection was even fit for the national stage. He asserted that the tapestries and Burgundian trophies were not "antiquities of the fatherland"; they were not made by "us," but were only linked to an important event in Swiss history.⁴⁹ After a year of continuous back-and-forth votes in parliament's upper and lower chambers—the Federal Council wanted Bern, the Council of States was set on Zurich—the final vote in a surprise turn went to Zurich, probably based on the Federal Council's concession that the cantons rightfully sought a decentralized government that ensured institutions would be dispersed throughout the country. Indeed, the very procedure for evaluating and voting on the contenders—namely that it had to be a unanimous decision between the Federal Council and cantons—was based on a model similar to how parliament had gone about the decision to locate the Federal Supreme Court in Lausanne.⁵⁰ That this decision for a national museum fell somewhat randomly due to matters of bureaucracy and appeasement suggests the degree to which the ideological investments into the past had become fraught and in need of modern parliamentary procedure.

The Opening of the Bern Historical Museum

Despite Bern's loss, the steering and building committees of the city's in-progress museum, now renamed the Bern Historical Museum rather than the Swiss National Museum, still continued with their building as planned. Head architect André Lambert had proposed his plans in March 1891, just three months before Zurich's surprise vic-

48 Zurich published its application to the government as a book in order to win public support: *Zürich's Bewerbung: Zürich und das Schweizerische Landes-Museum: den hohen Eidgenössischen Räten gewidmet im Dezember 1890* (Zurich: Hofer & Burger, 1890). For an overview of Zurich's efforts, see Cristina Gutbrod, "Nicht nur im Innern, sondern auch durch sein Äusseres geschichtlich docieren": Gustav Gull's Landesmuseum als bauliche Umsetzung von Johann Rudolf Rahns Verständnis schweizerischer Kunst und Architektur," *Zeitschrift für schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte* 69 (2012): 275–84; Sturzenegger, *Grosse Streit*, 157–61; Peter Ziegler, "Die Antiquarische Gesellschaft als Wegbereiterin kultureller Unternehmungen," *Mitteilungen der Antiquarischen Gesellschaft in Zürich* 51 (1982): 9–43, at 21–22.

49 Heinrich Angst, "Zürich und das schweizerische Nationalmuseum," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 24 February 1888. The questioning of Bern as location was in an anonymous article that Sturzenegger suggests must have been written by Angst: "Zum Bericht der Landesmuseums-Experten," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 4 December 1890; Sturzenegger, *Grosse Streit*, 71–73.

50 Sturzenegger, *Grosse Streit*, 75–77.

tory; his goal was to create a neo-Gothic pastiche inspired by extant structures across the country. These aesthetic borrowings, he argued, bore a “stamp of defiant vigor” befitting “the magnificent landscape within which they stand as well as the indomitable nature of the men who erected them”; their coming together would produce a building “destined to house the memories of our history, the products of national industry, and above all the trophies of patriotic glory” (*die Trophäen vaterländischen Ruhms*).⁵¹ The choice of the word “trophies” was no coincidence, since when it came to the adornment of the main entrance, Lambert envisioned a “mighty painting representing one of the more glorious events of our history,” presumably one of the events that produced the heritage that visitors could find in the museum upon entering.⁵²

Starting in 1893, the BHM’s building committee commissioned and evaluated sketches and cartoons from a number of historicist painters so that the entrance would have an impactful effect. But, like in the debates of the previous years, it was not entirely obvious to what kind of patrimony the museum should lay claim. At first, commission members shied away from the types of subject matters that had formed the basis of their national bid. Instead, they considered two drafts depicting the foundation of the city; these were met with lukewarm reception. Lambert, upon seeing the exemplars by Robert von Steiger, called for a more “enlivened image” like the Battle of Laupen against the Hapsburgs and had the artist produce two more drafts of that subject, both of which were also deemed unsatisfactory.⁵³

In an unexpectedly quick return to the idea of the Burgundian Wars, Gustav Adolf Karl Closs’s plan to memorialize the Battle of Murten was most enthusiastically received. The committee in fact wanted Closs’s initial sketch to be transformed into something even more monumental, with larger figures of soldiers and a central figure of a knight on horseback.⁵⁴ In response to these critiques, Closs fleshed out a new cartoon in watercolor (see Fig. 11.3). Rather than relying on popular medieval models like Schilling’s *Berner Chronik*, whose bloody battle scenes had by then been serially reproduced in various history books and monographs, Closs created a wholly new event perpetuating a version of historicism rooted in the transcending and moralizing of time and place. The Swiss troop, having just ascended a peak overlooking Lake Murten, contemplates their privileged viewpoint, their vanguard commander Hans von Hallwyl already seeming to celebrate the impending victory with his raised sword. With heavy strokes of white sunlight radiating from a dark cloud formation in

51 According to Biland, *BHM Architekturführer*, 11, the primary buildings that inspired Lambert were the Kornhaus in Neuchâtel, Schloss Avenches, the cloister of the abbey of St. George in Stein am Rhein, and the Stockalperpalast in Brig.

52 Biland, *BHM Architekturführer*, 18 gives these quotations without footnotes; I have been unable to locate the original source.

53 “Protokolle 1891–1898,” BHM, Direktionsarchiv 1.3.2, 53 (19 September 1893), 56 (5 December 1893), 58–59 (11 February 1894), and 64 (21 May 1894).

54 “Protokolle 1891–1898,” BHM, Direktionsarchiv, 1.3.2, 64.

the upper left corner, Closs signals victory as a destiny that would illuminate the shadowy, Burgundian-occupied town of Murten below. The building committee, however, had certain reservations about this image. For some, the central knight and his horse read as too mysterious and “foreign” (*fremdartig*); for others, there were complaints about the size of the weapons in the hands of the soldiers (though it is not stated whether they were too big or too small).⁵⁵ Resolving such inherent tensions between truth and fiction, familiar and fantastical, seems to have been an impossible task for an institution that by the mid-1890s was keenly aware of the semantics of medievalism and the question of why and for whom the Middle Ages should be appropriated. Three months later, the committee terminated its contract with Closs and employed committee member Léo-Paul Robert to design the main entrance. This was an act of faith since they did not even require a draft or a fixed subject matter before drawing up his contract; immediately after his initial submission of a watercolor draft, the mosaic went into production.⁵⁶

In choosing mosaic as the material for the main entrance, Robert and the building committee in some ways found space for medievalism within their art nouveau vision (see Fig. 11.2). Medieval materials and applied arts techniques were often understood to be effective communicators of modernity’s complexity because they could be industrially produced while also providing an emotional escape from industrialism. Writing in the British *Journal of the Society of Arts* in 1891, Clement John Heaton, who would a few years later be asked to manufacture the glass for the BHM’s mosaic, characterized his vitreous working materials as both ordinary and special, and able to communicate preciousness despite being manufactured in endless quantities.⁵⁷

On the level of symbolism, however, the eager reception of Robert’s vision is just as enigmatic as the mosaic itself. Surmounted by a Latin inscription describing the transitory nature of life and fame—“thus passes the glory of the world” (*sic transit gloria mundi*)—the scene unfolding below thematizes the progression of time as cause for both hope and fear.⁵⁸ Five personifications of the main historical epochs in Bern (prehistory, antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment) have

55 “Protokolle 1891–1898,” BHM, Direktionsarchiv, 1.3.2, 65–66 (18 September 1894), 74 (5 March 1895).

56 Perhaps this trust was because Robert was already working with Clement Heaton on the mosaics of the central staircase at the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire in Neuchâtel and the committee had observed his drafts or work. On the commission being given to Robert, see “Protokolle 1891–1898,” BHM, Direktionsarchiv, 1.3.2, 84 (20 June 1895), 85 (10 September 1895).

57 Clement Heaton, “The Use of Cloisonné for Decoration in Ancient & Modern Times,” *Journal of the Society of Arts* 39, no. 2002 (1891): 375–90, at 387.

58 The Latin phrase was used in papal coronations since the fifteenth century, but the reasoning behind its use as the mosaic’s inscription is unclear and, to my knowledge, also not mentioned in the textual record. We can presume that the public took this phrase literally within the context of the mosaic itself. German publishing house Karl Baedeker, which published highly popular guidebooks of European destinations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, described the mosaic quite plainly: “Above the main entrance is a large mosaic by P. Robert, intended to represent the aims of the mu-

wreaked havoc on the world, whose horizon line is filled with smoke and fire and whose base is a frieze of the skulls of the deceased. The past's darkness is illuminated by an elderly female allegory of History, who holds a lamp to see it and write her findings in her book. History's younger, alluring counterpart, Poetry, transfigures the solemn facts of the past through her art; she rests her lyre and throws pansies across the span of place and time.

Robert's mosaic in some ways seems to provide a self-reflective commentary on the issues of the previous decades about reclaiming the past. History is shaped not only by victory but also by violence and, in the process, many people and objects are memorialized and others forgotten. The past and its objects are not inherently visible and valuable, let alone artful; objects must be defined as such and, for that reason, any period of time can become laden with meaning through the presentism of history-writing and poetry. Robert's symbolism quite sophisticatedly and dialectically praises and undoes the power of symbols, but it also invests in the power of a particular definition of art and artfulness that did not always seek to dignify. Most obviously, the ethnographic objects that the BHM was aggressively collecting at the turn of the twentieth century seldom fit into Eurocentric ideals of the past and were more often used to illustrate "art's" counterpart. Rather than providing a more encompassing view of how and why to recuperate the past, the mosaic in many ways suggests the rise of a new and equally limiting criterion: a notion of artistic appreciation shared by the citizens of Bern and Switzerland, who would still use some objects to define themselves and take others as tools against which they could elevate themselves.

seum . . . Over the frieze is the inscription: Sic transit gloria mundi." Karl Baedeker, *Switzerland and the Adjacent Portions of Italy, Savoy, and Tyrol* (Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, 1903), 281.