

Installation View

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As they strolled through the exhibition *Swiss Posters*, which traveled through Europe, the USA, and South America from 1949 to 1952, visitors encountered two posters for a referendum on women's suffrage in Switzerland from 1946 placed side by side. [Fig. 31] The poster on the left advocated the implementation of women's suffrage, showing three women and three men drawn with fine lines in the unmistakable style of graphic designer and artist Hans Erni. Their equally muscular, androgynous body shapes hardly allowed one to distinguish between the two sexes, which corresponded with the equality being promoted. The poster on the right, by Donald Brun, showed a fly sitting on an abandoned pacifier, referring to an envisioned scenario of what would happen if the housewife was "distracted" from her motherly duties by political involvement. Brun's poster is an example of the illustrated *Sachplakat*, a popular design style practiced primarily by Basel-based designers during the 1940s.¹

This traveling exhibition was organized by Pro Helvetia, a foundation funded by the Swiss government that is responsible for cultural promotion at home and abroad.² As part of a series of similar endeavors whose task was to

represent the country on an international stage, *The Swiss Poster* must be seen in the context of Swiss cultural diplomacy.³ The voting posters were not just examples of Swiss poster design; they also provided visitors from abroad with an insight into the country's political system of regular referendums.⁴ Direct democracy is regarded as a factor that stimulated the development of Swiss poster production.⁵ However, a specific style of political poster or a uniform identity for the different parties cannot be observed until the 1970s.⁶ Accordingly, the posters by Erni and Brun represent their respective designer's personal approach, rather than that of any specific party or political grouping.

Besides providing an example of the extent to which political battles manifested themselves on a visual level in Switzerland, these posters also provide insights into the topics that were current in Swiss politics during the 1940s. It is surprising, however, that these posters on women's suffrage were among those chosen for purposes of national representation, as their content unmistakably depicted Switzerland's retrograde reality as one of the last European countries to continue to deny women the right to vote; it was not until 1971 that women's suffrage was granted on a federal level.⁷

- 1 This style was predominant at the Swiss national poster award "Beste Plakate des Jahres" during the 1940s until the mid-1950s. See APG 1991: 30–111. See also "The Basel School," in the volume *Tempting Terms*. Regarding the Swiss national poster award, see "Die besten Plakate / Les meilleures affiches," in the volume *Tempting Terms*.
- 2 Regarding the founding years of Pro Helvetia, see Hauser, Seger & Tanner 2010: 18–24.
- 3 In her PhD dissertation, the present writer focuses on the exhibition *The Swiss Poster*, analyzing the impact of traveling exhibition formats on the perception of Switzerland as a graphic design nation. About Swiss cultural diplomacy, see Gillibert 2013.
- 4 Direct democracy enables the Swiss population to take part in political decision-making processes at communal, cantonal, and national level on a regular basis. Parliamentary decisions can be called into question, and alterations and amendments can be proposed to the Federal Constitution. For further explanations about the Swiss political system, see Swiss Federal Council 2019. For a historical account of democracy in Switzerland, see *HLS* 2016.
- 5 In 1919, the federal parliament began to be elected by proportional representation, and it was at this time that voting posters gained in importance. To this day, posters remain a vital aspect of every referendum and election in Switzerland. See Richter 2014a: 36; Margadant 1983: 243.
- 6 See Margadant 1983: 243.
- 7 See Schaser 2009: 107.

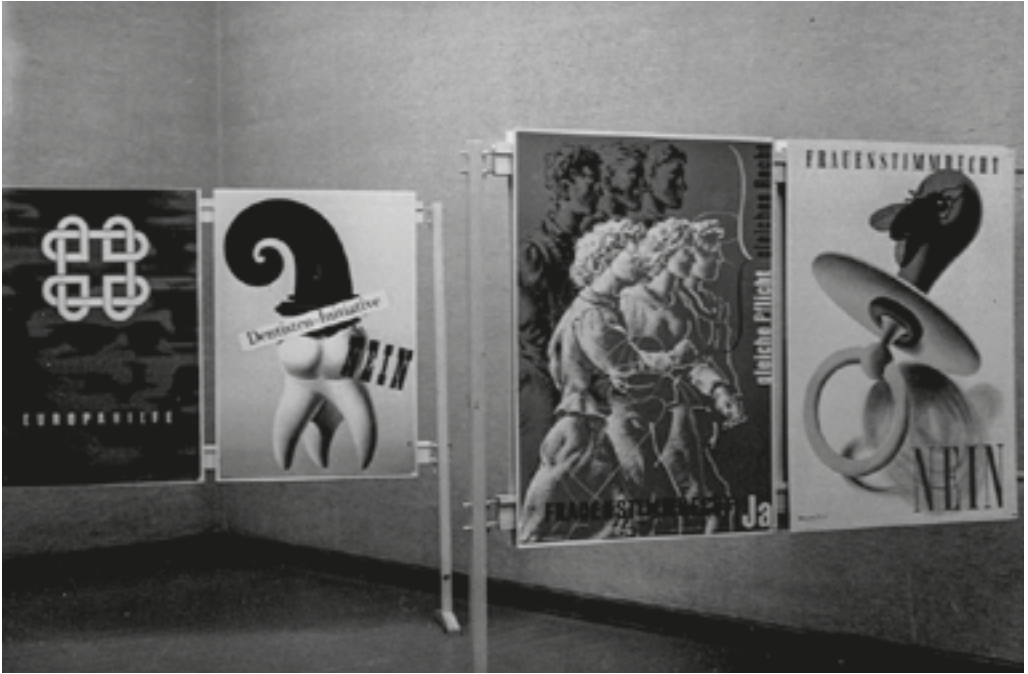


Fig. 31 Installation view of the exhibition *Swiss Posters*, organized by Pro Helvetia, Helmhaus Zürich, 1949.