

“Einsiedeln Abbey. 1000 Years of Pilgrimage”
National Museum Zurich | 16/09/17 – 21/01/18

Tour of the exhibition

It all began with Saint Meinrad

The Benedictine monk, Saint Meinrad, made the Etzel his home in 828, before moving deeper into the “Dark Forest”. He lived there as a hermit and recluse in a simple hermitage until he was murdered. Following his death, other hermits and the nobleman Benno arrived at the site of his ministry. The first monastic community under the Benedictine Rule was founded and in 934 the first church was built. Its first patrons included Duke Hermann I of Swabia and his wife Reginlinde, Lay Abbess of the convent of Felix and Regula in Zurich. In the 10th century, the abbey received considerable political and non-material support from the Ottonian rulers, first and foremost from Otto I as king and later emperor. The Ottonian imperial documents kept in the abbey’s archive and displayed in the exhibition bear witness to this important relationship and to the abbey’s first heyday in the 10th century. The exhibits of this early period include manuscripts from the abbey’s library and Saint Meinrad’s Benedictine Rule from the first half of the 9th century. Abbey legend has it that he took this with him into the Dark Forest.

Einsiedeln as a place of grace and pilgrimage destination

After the decline of the Ottonian dynasty in the early 11th century, the abbey lost its support. Now it was simply of regional importance. A pious swindle helped the abbey enjoy a new upswing as a pilgrimage destination: the Angels’ Blessing – a message attributed to Pope Leo VIII, but forged, that in the night of 13–14 September 948 Christ had blessed the newly erected chapel at the site of Saint Meinrad’s hermitage, rendering the planned blessing by the Bishop of Constance superfluous. The legend of the Angels’ Blessing gave prominence to Einsiedeln as a place chosen by God. The site became a place of grace. The aura of the Angels’ Blessing protected the abbey and encouraged Einsiedeln’s reputation as a pilgrimage destination. 130,000 people flocked to the Great Angels’ Blessing in 1466. For this purpose, the renowned copper engraver Master E.S. had graphic prints made of the Angels’ Blessing by order of the abbey, as devotional pictures and propaganda. Together with pilgrim badges, they are among the earliest evidence of the pilgrimage. Since 1729, the abbey has celebrated the Angels’ Blessing with a great festival of light every year on 14 September.

Criticism by the reformers

Ever since the recognition of the Angels' Blessing, the Pope has authorised Einsiedeln Abbey to grant indulgences. These result in a mitigation of punishment and therefore a reduced period of suffering in purgatory. The sale of indulgences was a lucrative business and attracted pilgrims in their droves. Trade in indulgences and the veneration of saints soon became a thorn in the side of the reformers. Ulrich Zwingli and Leo Jud voiced harsh criticism and condemned pilgrimages as occasions for squandering money, behaving in an unchaste manner and getting drunk. Einsiedeln Abbey is one of the few Catholic abbeys to have survived the Reformation almost completely intact.

Baroque piety

Having just about survived the Reformation, the abbeys joined together under the auspices of St. Gallen and Einsiedeln to form the Swiss Congregation of the Benedictine Confederation. This congregation implemented reforms and paved the way in the 17th century for the magnificent development of the Benedictine monasteries in Switzerland. Now it was not only the nobility who became monks, but men from all backgrounds. The number of monks subsequently increased dramatically. The present Baroque complex – visualised by a large abbey model – was built according to the plans of the Vorarlberg architect and later friar Caspar Moosbrugger. The major conversions and the Baroque redesign took from 1664 until 1744.

Disruption and new beginnings

The second major heyday during the Baroque period in which numerous members of the Catholic nobility visited the abbey as pilgrims and lavished plenty of gifts on it ended at the time of the French Revolution with the invasion of Einsiedeln by French troops in 1798 and the subsequent dissolution of the abbey. The monks managed to flee to Vorarlberg just in time with the Image of Grace, Our Lady of Einsiedeln, and other precious items. The French troops rampaged through the abbey, plundering it and destroying valuables and furnishings. They showed respect to the Chapel of Grace; rather than destroy it, they took it down stone by stone.

Pilgrimage in the 19th century

In 1799, the first monks returned to Einsiedeln. The Image of Grace was formally returned in 1803. However, the Chapel of Grace, the heart of the monastery church and house of Mary, was not rebuilt until 1816 and was opened on 14 September, the date of the Angels' Blessing. Plans and models illustrate the lengthy process

and the discussions that took place at the abbey about how the Chapel of Grace should be erected again and how the Image of Grace should be presented.

Einsiedeln's Image of Grace – pilgrims to see the Madonna

A statue of Mary has been worshipped in the chapel since the 12th century. A new statue had to be commissioned in 1466 after the original was destroyed in a devastating fire. This new sculpture, created before 1466, of the Mother of God standing with the child in her arms has been dressed in a fabric cloak since the late 15th century. Initially this was a simple coat, but since the Baroque era it has been a robe with a veil for both mother and child as well as crowns, a sceptre for Mary and opulent jewellery. The Image of Grace is staged in Baroque style. Most of the gowns and adornments are gifts from devout pilgrims. This exhibition will be the first time that so many of them have been on show. The 17 gowns on display include the oldest preserved gown from 1685, gowns from noble families such as the Hohenzollern, a St. Gallen embroidered gown from 1976 and right through to contemporary gowns from believers from Korea and India.

Miracles and votive offerings

Since Saint Meinrad's death, this place has been associated with miracles. An ever-increasing number of miraculous cures are attributed to worshipping Our Lady of Einsiedeln. As a show of gratitude for hearing their prayers and curing them of their ailments, pilgrims and believers present votive offerings (ex-votos) to the abbey in the form of paintings, wax votive figures, silver limbs, hearts or letters of thanks. Hung inside or in front of the Chapel of Grace as well as in the monastery church, they bear witness to miraculous cures and prayers heard. In the 17th century, the abbey recorded the miracles in reports. Miracle reports about the votive offerings are recounted in a mystical chapel via audio terminals.

Pilgrims bring money

Since the Middle Ages, pilgrimages have been one of the major sources of income for places of pilgrimage and their local region. Pilgrims stay overnight, dine out, purchase indulgences, and buy devotional objects and souvenirs. Until 1798, Madonna figures for scraping or blessed bonnets were produced in the abbey's own workshops, while the abbey's own printery made devotional pictures and graphic prints. Later, production facilities in the village, such as Benziger Verlag and the Lienhart candle factory, as well as numerous homeworkers began to make all kinds of keepsakes: decorated candles, home altars with the Image of Grace and Einsiedeln medallions depicting Mary.

Patrons, benefactors, donors

Ever since its foundation, the abbey has been showered with gifts of all kinds from patrons from all backgrounds. A central document is the register of benefactors, created under Abbot Ulrich Wittwiler and continued until 1785. This one-off record contains 1137 entries divided into social classes, from popes, emperors, noble ladies and gentlemen and clergy, all the way down to maids, with details of their donations. This unique source documents the importance of Einsiedeln Abbey and the support it has received from the nobility. Many of the gifts and offerings to the abbey have been lost, but many valuables have been preserved: the flowery embroidered "Turkish Rug" (around 1660/70) from Emperor Leopold I, the crown (1596/1616) belonging to Archduke Maximilian III, a chasuble with appliqué silver (1733) from Margravine Sybilla Augusta of Baden-Baden, a diamond-set brooch from Empress Josephine with a ring belonging to Napoleon as well as the most precious object from the abbey: the large monstrance, composed of individual pieces of jewellery donated to the abbey as votive offerings. A hand-coloured abbey inventory (1806) documents the abbey treasures prior to the invasion by French troops.

The scenography of the exhibition, enriched with film documentaries, music and audio terminals, comes from Holzer Kobler Architekturen in Zurich.