

# Landesmuseum Zürich.

## **The Swiss Army knife**

### **A tool that's become an icon**

9 July – 24 October 2010

Temporary exhibition at the National Museum Zurich

## **Tour through the exhibition**

How long have pocket knives been around? Why did this knife become such a success? How did Switzerland become the centre of European knife production? What role has the Swiss army knife played in design and art? What about knives and superstition? The exhibition «The Swiss Army knife. A tool that's become an icon» is seeking the historical traces of this iconic tool.

### **CULTURAL HISTORY**

From the earliest times, knives have been a part of cultural history as tools, weapons and status symbols. If a sharp blade is provided with a handle, it becomes a tool with almost infinite possibilities. An incredibly wide range of knife shapes and sizes has developed: they are used by hunters, butchers, cooks and craftsmen, on the dinner table as well as on the battlefield. The materials are as diverse as the shapes.

Five thousand years ago, metal blades – initially made of bronze and later of iron and steel – started to replace the earlier stone blades. Handles were either made of simple wood or of more precious materials such as ivory or mother-of-pearl, which turned lavishly decorated knives into works of art or richly symbolic cultic objects.

Every culture has clear rules and rituals associated with handling knives. Should food be cut in the kitchen, at table, or on the plate? Which knife is to be used for a certain task and which isn't? Who carries what kind of knife as a symbol of his social class, rank or trade? On which religious or secular occasions is a knife used and when may a knife not be used under any circumstances?

### **CURIOUS FACTS AND SENSATIONAL SUPERSTITIONS**

Knives inspire fear. They constitute a threat but also a means of defending ourselves against threats.

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In the early modern period, knives were often decorated with crosses, crescent moons, and other symbols supposed to lend them magic powers. However, only knives with a black handle purchased after an important holiday have such powers of defence. Knives were dedicated to heavenly or sa-tanic powers in complicated rituals. In addition, there were strict rules on how to use a new knife: Cutting bread was to be the first act. A knife stuck into the soil was said to ward off the spirits of the earth from a field and promote the growth of the crop. A knife aimed at the clouds was supposed to keep hail away, and one held into the wind could contain a storm. A knife under the pillow could heal diseases such as rheumatism, which were blamed on the curse of a witch – Hexenschuss, the German word for lumbago, still contains the word «witch».

Knives were able to conjure up good and evil powers also over long distances. Therefore, the sharp edge of the blade should never to face upwards on the table because it could injure the Heavenly Host. It was also forbidden to take a knife into church on the occasion of a wedding because it could put the bond of marriage at risk.

## MILITARY MATTERS

A good knife or dagger has always been a soldier's faithful companion as a weapon, tool and eating implement. The sixteenth-century «Swiss dagger» with its artistically decorated sheath that contained a small knife and awl can be seen as the predecessor of the modern soldier's knife.

In 1889, the Swiss army introduced a new rifle, which required a screwdriver for maintenance. At the same time, tinned food was becoming a more important part of military provisions, and so a combined tool was called for. In 1890 the modern soldier's knife was born, in which a knife, screw-driver, can opener, and awl were all folded away between two oak shells.

Over the years, the original model underwent a series of changes, such as the reduction of the initially bulky dimensions, the switch from oak to fibre or metal for the shells, and the use of stainless steel. The outstanding quality and conspicuous success of this soldier's knife meant that also other countries ordered knives from Ibach for their soldiers. The very newest model has been given out to rookies 2009.

## INNOVATION

Inspired by the success of the «soldier's knife» and the «officer's knife», Victorinox started to develop and produce knives with varied configurations of blades after the Second World War. A wide range of professions were provided with special

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knives adapted to their specific needs, but special versions were also on offer for almost any type of leisure activity, including knives for hunters, mountaineers, horsemen, fishermen, bikers, skaters, golfers, etc. The trend towards an increasing number of blades and tools culminated in a knife with fifty different blades (and resulting manageability issues!). The last step of the development from conventional knife to multifunctional tool was completed with the launch of Swiss Tool.

The traditional red of the grip shells gave way to colours such as blue, white, black and even shocking pink! New technology was also reflected in the popular models which include a memory stick for the computer.

## MADE IN IBACH

In 1884, following his years as an apprentice in Zug, Paris and Tuttlingen, Karl Elsener established a knife factory in Ibach-Schwyz. Up to this point, pocket knives for the Swiss army had been made in Solingen in Germany since there were only individual local knife manufacturers in Switzerland. Together with the Association of Swiss Master Cutlers, Elsener was able to bring the production of soldier's knives to Switzerland. In 1891, the first soldier's knife «made in Ibach» came out of Messer-Fabrik Karl Elsener and, six years later, Elsener had the so-called officer's knife patented.

Since 1921, the knife factory has been called Victorinox, derived from the first name of Elsener's mother Victoria and the French term inoxydable for stainless steel.

After the Second World War, the officer's knife became known around the world as the «Swiss Army knife». It was the basis for the company's success in the 1960s. The only Swiss competitor, the company Wenger SA of Delémont, was taken over by Victorinox in 2005. Today, Victorinox has 900 employees at its headquarters in Ibach. All components are still produced in Switzerland. Carl Elsener, jun. is the fourth-generation manager of Europe's largest cutlery company.

## PROMOTION

The red pocket knife with the Swiss emblem has become legendary. It symbolises quality, versatility, innovation and reliability. Companies from highly diverse sectors cleverly use the positive image of the Victorinox knife for their publicity: cars, bank accounts, cameras, cheese and many other products are advertised in this way.

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The broadcast of the US television series MacGyver, which was filmed between 1985 and 1994, further contributed to the iconic status of the Swiss army knife. The super agent uses the famous pocket knife to save countless people from perilous situations.

Advertising techniques have progressed tremendously since the days of the early Victorinox advertising boards and the automated knives that were used for window displays. Since the 1990s, the company has been equipping bobsleigh and sailing teams, and shooting its own promotional films. Victorinox has expanded its presence by opening flagship stores in Tokyo, New York and London. These shops sell all products from the five Victorinox divisions: knives, clothing, perfume, watches and luggage.

## Art & DESIGN

In 1977, the Museum of Modern Art in New York included the officer's knife – the Swiss Champ officer's knife model by Victorinox – in its Architecture and Design department for the first time. Six years later, the Munich Museum of Applied Art followed suit.

The fact that museums bestowed such honour on the Swiss army knife also had an effect on visual arts. In September 1985, the Venice Biennale had as its topic Art and the theatre from 1900 to 1984. Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen and Frank O. Gehry concluded their performance Il Corso del Coltello with a giant red Swiss army knife navigating the Arsenale canal. In Thomas Hirschhorn's 1998 Swiss Army Knife exhibition in Berne, an enormous red folding knife was placed at the centre of a large installation about Switzerland. The Italian designer Laura Mangiavacchi displayed the four Swiss products that were most popular in Italy on a series of postage stamps in the autumn of 2008: cheese, chocolate, watches and Swiss army knives.

## Publication to accompany the exhibition

The publication «The Swiss Army knife. A tool that's become an icon» is available at the Museum shop, or can be ordered from: [buchbestellung@snm.admin.ch](mailto:buchbestellung@snm.admin.ch)

## [www.sackmesser.kult.ch](http://www.sackmesser.kult.ch)

The website contains further information about the exhibition and the supporting programme.