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“Silvesterklausen”

Once despised, today admired

Special exhibition from 16 April – 2 October 2011

In mid-April, the Silvesterkläuse are leaving Appenzell for a six-month stay in Basel. The Doll's House Museum offers an insight into this quaint custom.

Some are “beautiful” and some are “ugly”. Their dress is elaborate and curious. At the end of the year, they make their way from farm to farm, and in the evening from inn to inn. We are talking here about the Silvesterkläuse from Urnäsch, the largest community in size in the Canton of Appenzell Outer Rhodes. They embody an ancient custom, the purpose of which is to wish people a happy new year. Now if you thought this custom was restricted to 31 December, you may be in for a surprise.

The Urnäsch Silvesterkläuse celebrate the turn of the year twice over: once in accordance with the modern-day Gregorian calendar and a second time in accordance with the Julian calendar, in which the old year ended on 13 January. With its special exhibition on the custom of Silvesterklausen from 16 April until 2 October 2011, the Doll's House Museum is bringing the Urnäsch custom to Basel – and with the Kläuse, comes the winter, too.

In order to provide an authentic environment for these quaint fellows, the third floor of the Doll's House Museum will be covered in snow all summer long. Accompanying video presentations and a slide show will provide visitors with a deeper insight into this centuries-old custom. The reason for staging this special exhibition in the summer months is quite simple: during the winter, the Silvesterkläuse are preoccupied with the preparations for their two appearances.

New Year's greetings

Even in the Middle Ages it was the custom in the outlying areas of Appenzell Outer Rhodes for various groups, known as “Schüppel” to make their way from farm to farm, wishing the people of the village a happy New Year on 31 December and again on 13 January.

They celebrated the turn of the year with Schellen (cow bells) and Rollen (round, slotted bells) and the “Zäuerli”, a natural, wordless yodel. A Schuppel consists of six to ten similarly-aged men. These groups are often founded by brothers, school friends or work colleagues. Every year, some 20 Schuppel make their way through Urnäsch celebrating this ancient custom. Each Schuppel has its own predetermined route, known in the local dialect as a “Strech”. The Schuppel gather in the early morning at the home of one of the members for Fröhklausen (early Klausen) where they practice their Zäuerli and rhythmically swing their “Schellen” and “Rollen” bells.

Then they set off to tackle the first part of their route. At each house they delight the residents with the sound of their bells and a “Zäuerli” yodel. The residents express their appreciation for the New Year’s greetings with mulled wine or other drinks and often with a cash gift as well. Comes the evening, instead of going from farm to farm, the Schuppel go from inn to inn. This so-called “Schlussklausen” (late Klausen) often lasts until late at night.

Beautiful, ugly and beautiful-ugly

The three different types of Kläuse are distinguished by their dress, known in the local dialect as “Groscht”. The Ugly Kläuse, referred to colloquially as the “Wüeschte”, wear frightening masks with gaping mouths, huge teeth and long horns as well as old coats and jackets decorated with natural materials.

The Beautiful Kläuse on the other hand wear bead adorned hats featuring scenes portraying everyday village life. They make new bonnets and hats every three or four years.

Preparations for this often begin shortly after 13 January. The “Schö-Wüeschte Chläus” (Beautiful-ugly Kläuse) are a mixture of the two above-described forms and are often also known as Forest or Nature Kläuse.

Like the Ugly Kläuse, the Beautiful-ugly Kläuse use natural materials such as fir twigs or beech leaves. However they differ in their designs. Unlike the Ugly Kläuse, they additionally decorate their “Gröscht” with berries, snail shells or moss. The Nature Kläuse portray various scenes, rather like the Beautiful Kläuse. However, these tend to be animal or woodland scenes, embodied with hand-carved figures.

“Schuppel” and “Rollewiiber”

The functions within a Beautiful Kläuse Schuppel are clearly defined. Two of the Kläuse are so called “Rolli” or “Rollewiiber”. They wear wheel-shaped bonnets on their heads and a female folk costume and Rollen (round slotted bells) draped on their bodies. The four “Schelli” or “Schellechläus” wear square hats and are dressed in a more masculine style. On their front and back, they carry huge cowbells, the Schellen. One of the Silvesterkläuse leads the Schuppel and is known as the “Vorrolli”. To symbolise this, he traditionally carries

a white flower in his mouth. The one known as the “Noerolli”, rounds off the group at the rear and carries a blue flower in his mouth.

The battle to keep up the custom

Historians attribute the custom of Sylvesterklausen to a late-mediaeval St. Nicholas custom celebrated by monastery school pupils in the 15th century. It rapidly became a controversial custom on account of the wild and carnival-like goings-on. As early as the 17th century, the church expressed its criticism for the first time in writing. Even in the following years, the custom of Sylvesterklausen was regarded with little enthusiasm.

In the Canton of Appenzell Inner Rhodes it was even prohibited from 1776 until 1808 under threat of fine. On the other hand, the Canton of Appenzell Outer Rhodes just managed to maintain the custom, albeit with certain restrictions. For example, in 1915 the Outer Rhodes authorities prescribed precisely where and when Klausen was permitted to take place. The first favourable report on the custom only appeared in 1920. Today this custom has become established in Urnäsch and the surrounding communes and is an integral part of the New Year festivities.

Laura Sinanovitch, Managing Director of the Doll's House Museum in Basel, became aware of the miniature wood carvings on the bonnets and hats of the Beautiful Kläuse through reports in the media. The elaborate costumes, bonnets and hats, complemented by a large amount of background information, are set to fascinate visitors to the Doll's House Museum from 16 April 2011.

Opening hours

Museum, shop and café: daily from 10.00 –18.00

Admission

CHF 7.00 / 5.00

Children up to 16 years of age are admitted free of charge and only in the company of adults.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.
The entire building is wheelchair-accessible.

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“Silvesterklausen”

An ancient custom that is still alive today in Urnäsch

Glossary

Chlausen	The activities of the “Kläuse” on New Year’s Eve or the rhythmic movements of the cow bells and round, slotted bells to generate sounds.
Groscht/Grösch	Costume/dress worn by the “Silvesterkläuse”; derived from “rüsten”, “Rüstung”, meaning to arm, armour.
Mannevolch (-völcher)	Man dressed in a male “Klausen” costume; in the vernacular simply “Mann”, or man.
Neorolli	“Nach-Rolli”, the final Claus in a group.
Rolle	Round bell.
Rollewiiber	“Rollenweib”, Claus dressed in something resembling a traditional female folk costume; they wear wheel-shaped bonnets and have a number of “Rollen” – round slotted bells – draped on their bodies.
Rolle	Shortened form for “Rollenklaus” or “Rollenweib”.
Schelle	Cow bell.
Schellechläus	“Schellenkläuse”. They carry two large cow bells, one on the chest and one on the back.
Schelli	Shortened form for “Schellenklaus”.
Schuppel/Schüppel	A group of Clauses (between 6 and 14 men/children).
Strech	The route chosen by a group; derived from “Landstrich”, or stretch of land.
Vorrolli	The leading “Rolli” in a group of Clauses.
Wirtschaft	Pub.
Wiibervölcher	“Weibervolk”; man dressed in a female Claus costume. In the vernacular, simply “Frau”, or woman.
Zäuerli	A wordless yodel, typical of the Appenzell region.
Zauren	To perform a “Zäuerli”, a wordless yodel.
Znüni	Snack.

The 3 types of Claus:

“Die Schöne”	The Beautiful
“Die Wüeschte”	The Ugly
“Die Schö-Wüeschte”	The Beautiful-Ugly