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NATIONAL CABINETS: THE SWISS NATIONAL MUSEUM AND ITS CABINET

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As a representative of a national museum I have been asked to speak about the role of national cabinets and their experience with the public.

Taking the Cabinet of the Swiss National Museum as an example I'll give you a short survey of that institute and its field of activity.

In 1890, the Assembly of the Swiss Federation voted for the foundation of a national museum. Its future tasks were defined as collecting, conserving and exhibiting Swiss antiquities of artistic or historical interest - of course coins and medals were also included. Though the decision to have a national museum was made, the question of its location was still very much open. The capital of Switzerland, Bern, and the capitals of the cantons, Zurich, Basel and Lucerne were competing.

After a long debate, Parliament voted for the city of Zurich as site of the future museum.

In accordance with the Federal Act on the setting up of a national museum, the city of Zurich now had to provide both land and buildings. Furthermore, the city had to yield its public historic collections to the new museum, so that these could be joined with the collections of the Swiss Federation. Of course, the other cantons kept their collections to be shown in their own local museums of history. This explains why items from Zurich are predominant in the National Museum both in regard to quality and quantity, even today. Regarding purchases, Parliament had explicitly stipulated that the National Museum should not enter in competition with cantonal museums. The idea being that cantonal museums should have an option right for objects that they consider of special interest for their canton's own history.

This situation not only applies to the National Museum as a whole but also to its Numismatic Department, i.e. to the Coin Cabinet. Since the opening of the National Museum in 1898, the Coin Cabinet has been an independent department of the Museum. Its collection is made up of the collection of the City Library of Zurich – the origins of which go back to the 17th century - the coin collection of the Swiss Federal Archives, and various remarkable private collections donated to the Museum at the beginning of the century. The collection consists primarily of coins and medals that were either made or used in Switzerland. The objects range from Celtic coinage to modern federal coins.

Moreover, there is a collection of Swiss paper money, of dies and of coin finds.

The collection consists of about 60,000 items and is probably worldwide the most complete collection of Swiss coins and medals. In 1935, an universal collection of 25,000 coins and a study collection of Greek and Roman coins was added to the Cabinet as a loan. These collections complete the Swiss holdings and are extremely useful for comparative studies in the sector of numismatic research and teaching.

Hereby, two of the main tasks of the National Cabinet are mentioned. The Cabinet plays a significant role in numismatic research. It is in close collaboration with the Faculty of History of the University of Zurich. Twice a year, a numismatic colloquium for future archaeologists, art historians and historians is held.

The Cabinet is provided with a large numismatic library. It disposes of a reading room and can offer various working places for guest numismatists. The Cabinet is open not only to specialists but to all. Amateurs and collectors can - after having made an appointment with the curator - consult the collection and use the library.

Yearly, the Cabinet is visited by 60 to 70 people. Once a week, coins can be brought to be identified. Estimations, on the other hand, are not given.

A further aim of ours is to rouse the public's interest in questions on money and its history. We do this by including themes related to the history of money in the permanent exhibition which corresponds to a circuit through Swiss history. In addition, special numismatic exhibitions take place in a security zone especially conceived for numismatic shows. Finally, we regularly offer guided tours concentrating on numismatic exhibits. These tours are popular with a wide and varied public.

Last but not least, collaboration in numismatic and museological committees is an important part of our work. I shall give you two examples of such activity. The Association of the Zurich Numismatists - traditionally presided over by the curator of the National Cabinet - organizes every winter a series of public lectures on numismatic themes. These are given by specialists both from Switzerland and from abroad. Another example is the Swiss Museums Association which encourages the exchange of information between employees of national, regional and local museums. Small museums very often have a coin collection but nobody to look after it. In such cases, the National Museum offers advice as to questions of inventorying and conservation. In special cases the Cabinet can also take on some specific task such as chemical analyses, restoration or identification of coins. This collaboration is usually profitable for both sides.