A VERY OLD AND VERY MODERN FLAG -

THE SWISS CROSS

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Abstract :
A very old and a very modern flag : the Swiss Cross. Why ? Because in 1289 already, the Emperor Frederic 11 entitled the people of Schwyz to add a Crucifixion scene on the upper left canton of their red flag... symbol which rapidly evolved to a simple white cross, until 1889 : date of the actual Swiss flag.
From 1339, the confederates - when on battle fields - stitched this white cross on their garments or painted it on their armours (first appearance of uniforms ?).
The Red Cross, founded in 1864 in Geneva, adopted the colours and form of the (square) Swiss flag reversed.
Switzerland : the only nation whose coat of arms is similar to its flag.

Résumé :
Un drapeau aussi ancien que moderne : La croix suisse
Pourquoi ? Car, c'est en 1289 déjà, que l'empereur Frédéric II octroye aux paysans de Schwyz, le droit d'arborer une image du Christ en croix dans le canton supérieur gauche de leur bannière rouge. Cette croix évolue rapidement en simple symbole blanc et le drapeau national · actuel (carré) date de 1889.
Dès 1339, sur les champs de bataille, les Confédérés peignent sur leurs armures ou cousent sur leurs vêtements des croix blanches (prémices d'un uniforme ?).
La Croix Rouge, fondée à Genève en 1864, adopte l'emblème suisse inversé.
Suisse: seul pays où les Armes d'État sont semblables au drapeau.

A Slide Presentation

Fig. 1. To fully understand a flag, history is essential. The genesis of Switzerland started in 1291 with the alliance of three free peasants from three valleys in today's central Switzerland who gathered to swear an everlasting alliance against the Habsburg Empire, which was trying to oppress their ancients liberties in order to gain control over the Alpines passes. Those first confederated men came from Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden,

Here we see a romantic depiction of the scene on the reverse side of the flag of the "Society of the Original Swiss". The flag dates from 1911. The original three Swiss swearing their alliance has been a most popular motif through the past century until well into the 20th century. Neighbouring city-states, seeing a way to escape from Habsburg predominance, adhered to the alliance. Soon the victorious alliance grew with other wealthy city-states, ecclesiastical territories and free valleys, but all of the members of this confederation, which later were to be name "cantons", zealously kept their independence and their flags.

Fig. 2. The oldest preserved flag of Schwyz is kept in the Archives of Federal Charters and can be dated back exactly to the year 1315. It is a plain red banner.

Fig. 3. The flag of Schwyz you see here is dated somewhat later, namely 1339, and it carries a small canton with a Crucifixion scene from the Passion of the Christ. It is called the "heilig-rych", which one could translate into English as the "Holy Empire". It is a widespread symbol of the Holy Roman Empire of Germanic nations denoting the privilege of liberty and grace from the Emperor. Emperor Frederick II gave the people of Schwyz privileges of liberty in 1240 and the right to carry the "Holy Empire" on their plain red flag in 1289. The chronicles of the time used to represent the flag of Schwyz, plain red with a tiny white cross in the upper canton or with a very simplified version of the "Holy Empire" emblem in white on the upper canton

The canton's name was the eponym for Switzerland and one can realize what influence its flag has had on the adoption of the actual national flag of Switzerland. But... there is more..when united in battle under their many flags, military tactics made it necessary to have a common rallying symbol. What could be more significant to denote the holy right of liberty than the Christian cross ?

Fig. 4. It must not be forgotten that the Swiss were very strong believers. They used to pray before and after the battle. At the battle of Laupen, in 1339, against the Austrians, confederated troops stitched crossed strips of white linen on their garments or painted white crosses on their armour in order to identify both themselves and their cause. This picture from the late 15th century chronicle by Diebold Schilling shows Bernese troops in church before leaving for the battle. One will notice the crosses at the front and back of the suits of armour.

The year 1339 is recorded to be the first time ever a white cross was used by Swiss troops as a common emblem. The simple yet most important symbol of the time was easy both to make or paint and recognize. From then on, the white slender cross was sewn or painted on the military flags, clothes and armour of the confederates. During the next 200 years, each time a confederated military force united, the white cross was painted on the various cantonal flags.

Fig. 5. In this picture from Schilling's chronicle, the Swiss are about to leave for the battle of Nancy, in 1477. Since the expedition to Nancy was carried out just by minor cantonal forces, one sees only the simple cantonal military flag or colours, which consist of bicoloured square flags without any addition, except the confederate cross.

Fig. 6. Here is another picture showing the Swiss crossing the Alps in order to help Pope Julius II to free Lombardy from French occupation. Again, we notice the white cross on their clothes.

Fig. 7. Pope Julius II rewarded his allied Confederates in 1512 by giving them superb banners made of Milanese silk. The "Julius banner' of Schwyz is composed of three bands of damask, rectangular, height 196 cm, width 183 cm. The painted corner motif in gold on a black background shows the Crucifixion and the instruments of the Passion; in the smaller field, St Veronica's veil, and behind, the Papal keys. In the center of the upper half of the banner, the Madonna and Child in gold standing on a crescent moon, within a mandorla (oval aureole or halo, Ed.). It is bordered on three sides by an inscription glorifying the Virgin. Its figures and decorations are only painted on, while whose on other "Julius banners" are almost always embroidered.

Fig. 8. Here is the Julian banner of Uri, a black bull's head on yellow silk, with a crucifixion scene in the upper corner and the keys of St. Peter below it. Many of these flags dated 1512 are still preserved, records of others - now vanished - appear today on stained glass or in flag books.

Fig. 9. The chronicle of Johann Stumpf written in the year of 1548, contains a map of what is today Switzerland with a square red flag with a white cross throughout and a red "schwenkel". Stumpf even depicts a state coat-of-arms for the whole Confederation, which consist of the same design on a shield, surmounted by two crossed flags of the same and a halberd and dagger. Halberds and daggers were typical Swiss weapons of the time. The Stumpf chronicle is the first record of the white cross on red, both as a flag and a coat of arms, as the national identifying symbol of the Confederation. At the beginning of the 16th century, the Swiss were heavily involved in the battles of northern Italy, their gallantry deserving admiration from both friends and foe. After the Swiss had destroyed the army of Louis XII at the battle of Novara in 1513, it was the turn of Francis I, who acceded to the throne of France after the death of King Louis in 1515, to beat the Swiss.

Fig. 10. Here we have the flag of Zurich at Marignan. It still has a religious symbol, and the red "schwenkel" with the white cross. Impressed by their military strength, Francis I immediately sought to reconcile with them. The "Eternal Peace" between France and the Confederation was signed in1516 and had a profound influence on the future of our nation... In fact, instead of trying to extend their territories at the cost of their neighbours as was usual at the time, the Swiss provided their neighbouring princes with regiments.

Fig. 11. And for the next nearly 300 years, the Swiss went to France by regiments, their square flags with a white cross dividing the flag into four corners, each showing the colours of the canton or those from the coat-of-arms of the regiment's colonel in a typical "flame" design. Very often too, the flames combined cantonal and personal colours. This is the ordinance flag of the Swiss Guard regiment of the king of France Louis XV, in the year 1724. One may appreciate the typical flame design and the white cross.

Fig. 12. And here we see the ordinance flag of the "Diesbach" regiment of the period of 1764-1785. Then came the French Revolution which swept away the old and everything was remodelled, including flags. Following the French tricolour's example, national striped flags with three or sometimes two colours were adopted through the influential sphere of French armies or French revolutionary ideals.

Fig. 13. In early 1798, the weak Swiss Confederation crumbled under the French armies, and immediately the new revolutionary government adopted a national tricoloured flag for the newly established Helvetic Republic. The unusual colour green, which at the time had become the symbol of freedom, was combined on a horizontally striped flag with the traditional Swiss red colour and the colour yellow. This tricolour is, in fact, the first official national flag of Switzerland, but it only lasted four years. Cantonal flags were no longer displayed, neither were the coats-of-arms. To further efface all remembrance of the old Confederation, the new government ordered all the remaining ancient banners, which had not been taken away by the French, "To be collected and cut to pieces and the cloth to be sold for the benefit of the Nation". Happily, a widespread opposition to the Helvetic Republic and the love for the old, traditional flags, saved many of the ancient banners from being destroyed.

Fig. 14. As of 12 May 1798, the official seal of the republic showed William Tell with his son and the apple with dart, this image becoming a common revolutionary national symbol in the country. It was used as a central device on the colours of the Helvetic half-brigades, which went into service with the armies of Bonaparte. As all the flags of the Helvetic half-brigades were lost, we have today only drawings of them. The one represented here is a water-colour from the Army Museum of Paris, showing the flag of the number 4 half-brigade with the Tell symbol in the white central panel and the colours red, green and yellow in the corners. William Tell, wearing a hat with red, green and yellow feathers, is standing beneath a green liberty tree and the French republican fasces with a Phrygian cap in French colours.

Political struggle and uprising against the new order, compelled Bonaparte in 1803 to dissolve the unitarian Helvetic Republic and to give the country a new confederative constitution instead, with the addition of some new cantons. This historic event of 18 February 1803 is known as the "Act of Mediation". The tricolour disappeared and the old colours came back. Three new cantons were admitted into the Confederation after the defeat of Napoleon in 1814-15. Common sense reigned again, and our country became a confederated state as before, composed of its old and new cantons with flags of their own. There was no national flag for the Confederation. Still, the nation was not unchanged : Patriotics movements emerged from the highly popular rifle and gymnastic associations and young officers, having recognized the necessity of a united army, insisted on the adoption of a federal flag for the army. By 1815 all the various cantonal units guarding the frontier had been using a red arm-band with a white cross.

Fig. 15. It took until 1848 when finally, with the new constitution, a red flag with a couped white cross was adopted for the army. All cantons were invited to supply their units with the federal flag with the canton's name inscribed in golden letters on both sides of the horizontal bar of the cross. This flag for the Zurich militia served as a model.

Fig. 16. This lithograph of 1852 shows a soldier with the federal brassard and the federal flag. The cross was composed of five squares, making it look somewhat plump. It was changed, in 1889 into the more slender form we know today : the length of the cross arms being one-sixth more than their width.

Fig. 17. In 1863, Henri Dunant invited the representatives of 14 Countries to Geneva to adhere to the first agreement on victims of war. The Geneva convention was signed in 1864 and the representatives, honouring Switzerland, chose as their emblem the Swiss flag with inverted colours : the Red Cross emblem was born. The proportions of the red cross flag and those of the Swiss flag were identical. Since 1941, there has been a rectangular form of the Swiss flag for use as an ensign on ships. The national seal and national coat-of-arms showed the same design, Switzerland being the only country in the world having identical seal, flag and coat-of-arms, and also being the only country in the world with a flag which cannot be hung the wrong way. And apart from the Vatican City, it is the only square flag too.

Fig. 18. And even if Napoleon said, speaking of flags, "It is with such baubles that men are led", we believe that this cross, born of the crucifix, which symbolized for so many centuries honour and devotion to the country and the renown of Switzerland, exerted an undeniable influence on our Nation's character. And finally, I hope - without thinking only of vexillology - that those among you who give us the happy surprise of a visit, will thus have pleasure in seeing our Flag merrily flying in a big blue sky.

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Simone de Rham

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Mme Simone de Rham, born in 1915, a citizen of Switzerland, takes her first step at the ICV18 in Victoria as a vexillological lecturer. However, Simone is no stranger to vexillology as she has taken part, with her late husband, Casimir de Rham, in fourteen congresses! Mother of two and grandmother to three, Madame de Rham resides in Lausanne.
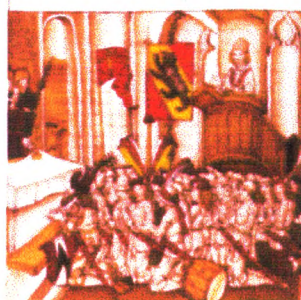

Flags decorating the balconies of the Laurel Point Inn, site of ICV18, include the Swiss Vexillological Association's, Switzerland's, East Germany's and the flag of Victoria. Right, at the 12th ICV, San Francisco, we see ..., the late Norman Logan (Scotland), Roger Baert (Belgium), .., Simone de Rham and her late husband, Casimir de Rham, .., and John Hall (UK)
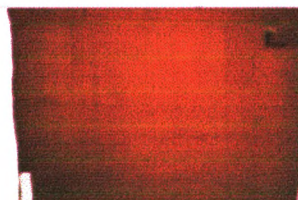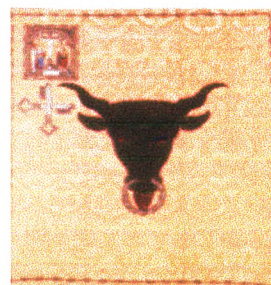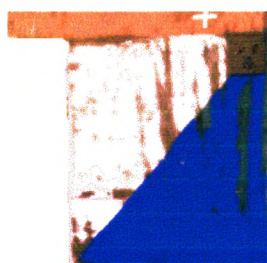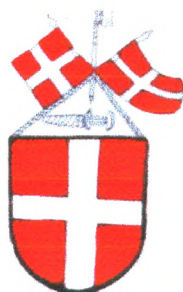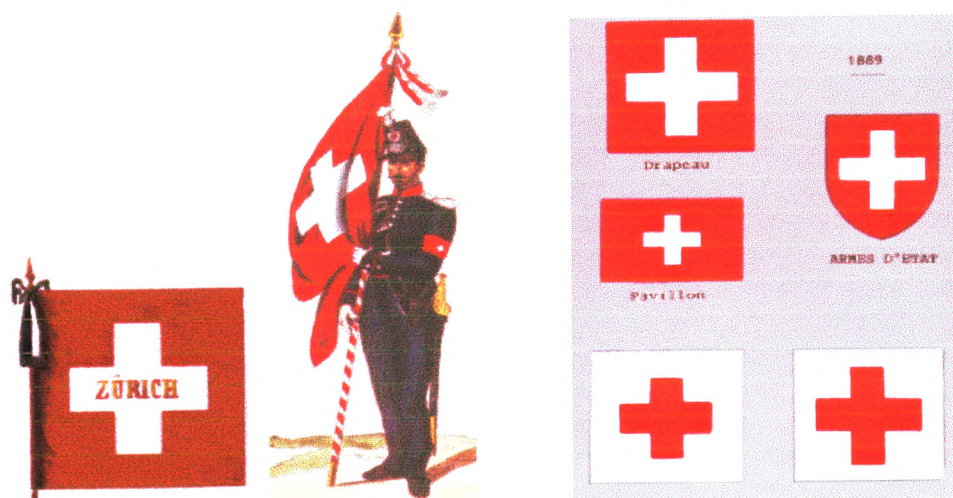
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Figs. 4, 5

Figs. 6, 7, 8

Figs. 9, 10

Figs. 11, 12 , 13 and 14

Figs. 15, 16, and 17

Fig. 18