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Exhibition

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LA MANUFACTURE DE PORCELAINE DE LANGENTHAL, ENTRE DESIGN INDUSTRIEL ET VAISSELLE DU DIMANCHE | DIE PORZELLANMANUFATUR LANGENTHAL, ZWISCHEN INDUSTRIEDESIGN UND SONNTAGSGESCHIRR

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Thanks to a handful of local worthies, the founding of the Langenthal kilns in 1906 saw Swiss porcelain return to the marketplace after a century in the doldrums. To jumpstart the process, skilled craftsmen were imported from Northern Europe, as was the raw material (kaolin and coal) they had to transform. The first objects were produced on January 17, 1908.

From the artistic point of view, the appointment of Fernand Renfer as head of design in 1920 gave a fresh impetus to form and decoration, which up till then had wisely relied on Heimatschutz. Renfer was trained at the ceramics school of Chavannes-Renens and at the art schools of Paris and was right up to date with the new trends. He wasted no time in introducing Jugendstil, with its brightly-coloured, stylized floral decoration. Fernand Renfer was once again the moving force behind the company joining the Schweizer Werkbund in 1925, with the aim of adapting designs and decorations to the demands of industry. Collaboration with artists and designers was further intensified through the creation of a "studio" run by Fernand Renfer and his son Pierre.

Outside this artistic production, the company developed other sectors in parallel, such as electro-porcelain (from 1918), hotel and restaurant services, utilitarian crockery (the Resista brand, from 1918). It stood out in these different fields for the excellence of its products and its reliability. The wide range of products was further boosted by Brown Boveri's construction in 1937 of the first electric tunnel kiln in the world, which put an end to the dependency on foreign coal and enabled firing to continue twenty-four hours a day.

Having negotiated the two world wars and their immediate consequences as best it could (reduced foreign workforce as a result of mobilisation across Europe, difficulties in obtaining raw materials, collapse in demand), the company entered a golden age between 1950 and 1970, reaching a peak of one thousand employees. Finding itself in the grip of an economic crisis in 1988, Langenthal merged with Keramik Holding Laufen AG and after a succession of takeovers, production was gradually relocated to the Czech Republic.

Nowadays, Langenthal makes only china designed for use in hotels and the Bernese factory buildings now lie derelict. Even so, the fact remains that Langenthal is the Swiss porcelain manufacturer that has stayed in business longest and its history has become deeply embedded in Swiss culture. This catalogue of the exhibition held in the Musée Ariana traces the various stages in the fascinating story of the rise and fall of a company its employees affectionately called "Porzi".

Anne-Claire Schumacher is a historian and curator at the Musée Ariana.