

SWISS MARKET REPORT

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All art is political: Switzerland's Blocher puts masterpieces on display

Denis Balibouse



MARTIGNY, Switzerland, Dec 6 (Reuters) - Christoph Blocher's vast collection of works by Switzerland's master painters is a fitting accompaniment to the 79-year-old billionaire's decades at the vanguard of right-wing Swiss politics.

A 127-piece sample from his private trove, on display at the Fondation Pierre Gianadda in Martigny from December until June, celebrates Switzerland's rural roots and iconic geography, with a dash of the heroic folk identity Blocher has long championed.

A former government minister for the anti-immigrant Swiss People's Party, Blocher is his country's best-known and most polarising politician. Since the 1980s he has championed an independent, sovereign Switzerland firmly outside the European Union that surrounds it.

The majority owner of polymers and chemicals maker EMS Chemie has drawn on his fortune of 11 billion Swiss francs (\$11.03 billion) to build one of the world's most comprehensive collections of Swiss masterpieces.

PUBLICITÉ

His populist vision of a nation under siege from the outside world clearly informs his taste in fine art. The collection includes Ferdinand Hodler's monumental "Retreat from Marignano," depicting the 1515 battlefield defeat that in Swiss mythology marks the nation's inward turn toward neutrality.

Also well-represented are Hodler's expressionist, blue-hued mountainscapes, including the fog-shrouded Eiger and the 2,190 metre (7,185 ft) Stockhorn above Lake Thun, as are Albert Anker's bucolic 19th-century scenes of peasants celebrating village life for which Blocher's deep affection shines through.

In 2015, Blocher paid 4.2 million francs for Anker's "Wine Festival", painted in 1865, at an auction in Zurich.

"There is one historical constant in our country, and that is the eternal pressure being brought to bear upon our nation," Blocher said this year in a speech. "For seven hundred years, it has been so."

As his political career has waned, Blocher, an engaging orator whose rustic, plain-spoken style has endeared him to loyal supporters even as his right-wing ideas enraged foes, has taken to lending selected works to small museums around the country "so other people can enjoy them, too", as he told a Swiss newspaper in 2015 for a previous exhibition. (\$1 = 0.9972 Swiss francs) (Reporting by Denis Balibouse, writing by John Miller Editing by Gareth Jones)

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