



Depot: Historisches Museum Luzern

**Backstage: actors take visitors through the museum's collection in Lucerne, using artefacts as props**

## CASE STUDY: HISTORISCHES MUSEUM LUZERN

Kilian T Elsasser explains how a small museum in Switzerland is using **actor-led tours** to help bring its collection of historical artefacts to life

Every day on the hour, an actor-guide takes visitors behind the scenes at the Depot: Historisches Museum Luzern (Lucerne), using the museum's Stockroom as their stage and its collection as props. Employing the simplest techniques, such as changing hats or the way they speak, the actors become a rebellious Swiss peasant and then a proud nobleman.

As the nobleman, the actor takes a piece of historic armour from a drawer and describes how wearing it bestowed honour and social importance. As the disgruntled peasant, he takes an arrow from a crossbow and explains that it could penetrate the nobleman's armour – and his invincibility. The tour shows in a vivid way how technological developments changed warfare and were an important factor in the Swiss independence wars in the late Middle Ages.

The actor-led tours last nearly an hour, and are tailored to visitors' interests and ages. One moment the actor is a low-paid worker in one of Lucerne's grand hotels in the 19th century, for example, the next they are an intellectual revolutionary championing reform. The actors also lead children's tours, where they reveal tales of knights and castles.

The actors, all experienced professionals, typically work at the museum one day a week, leading five or six tours on different themes. Sadly, the tours are only in German.

Each year the museum staff develop two new tours; the latest is about smoking, in which guides talk about the role of smoking in Swiss and other cultures. The tours are combined with a simple temporary exhibition, with further information and artefacts.

As well as the Stockroom, the museum shows its collection in a space that is more open storage than conventional gallery. On shelves behind glass or mesh, there is all manner of objects, from mortars, oil paintings and pikes to halberds, uniforms and potsherds.

The artefacts are bar-coded rather than labelled, and visitors can discover how old an object is and what it was used for using a hand-held device and swiping the bar code. This technology allows the curators to update these electronic labels from a laptop and create special themed tours. The combination of actor-led tours and the open store make Lucerne's history museum quite unlike any other historical museum.

Actor-led tours of the Stockroom have limitations: as on any guided tour, there is not enough time for the visitors to study at length objects that catch their eye. Also, the tour would be better if there were time to ask questions. That said, this novel technique provides vivid and emotive historical insights into the past that conventional displays often lack.

The Historisches Museum Luzern has just two curators plus six part-time actors, and a collection that lacks 'star' items such as a Rosetta Stone or works by famous artists. But it is pioneering ways to communicate with its visitors using an imaginative combination of live interpretation, new technology, and far more of its collection than is typically on show in a museum of this size. Such is the professionalism of the actors, the tours deserve listing under 'theatre' as well as 'museums' in Lucerne's 'what's on' guides. **MP**

[www.hmluzern.ch](http://www.hmluzern.ch)

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