

Reformed museum for the 'Protestant Rome' Geneva's International Museum of the Reformation: Geneva's International Museum of the Reformation

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Geneva is known around the world as the birthplace of the Calvinist Reformation, and now the Swiss city that is sometimes called the Protestant Rome has the International Museum of the Reformation for pilgrims and tourists.

The city on the banks of Lake Geneva heretofore had no institution to commemorate a period that altered the course of history in Europe and farther afield.

“The museum is a place for history, but above all history that is alive,” says the museum’s director, Isabelle Graesslé, an ordained minister.

The permanent exhibition was quietly inaugurated in mid-April—at a time when the world’s news media blanketed Vatican City with daily coverage of the transition in Catholicism between popes.

The Protestant museum uses original books, manuscripts, paintings and engravings to trace the history of the Protestant movement, initiated in the city by French theologian John Calvin in the 16th century.

Alongside artifacts are state-of-the-art interactive and audio-visual displays explaining the turbulent history and ideas of Protestantism up to the present. Its Web site is www.musee-reforme.ch. Geneva today serves as the headquarters for the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Lutheran World Federation.

The museum cost 4 million Swiss francs (\$3.4 million) to build and launch. It is housed in the “Maison Mallet,” which stands on the site of the former cathedral cloisters in the heart of Geneva’s old town, where citizens of the city adopted the Reformation in 1536.

Visitors can use an audio guide in French, English or German to accompany them through the exhibits. And there are also plans to produce information in other languages, such as Korean.

There are 400 original objects, including the first French Bible, of 1535, Calvin’s manuscripts, 19th-century historical paintings, and displays about issues such as the spread of Protestant missions around the world, the ordination of women and the contemporary movement for church unity.

A special film was created from archival newsreel footage portraying the role played by some Protestants in the struggle against Nazism in Germany and apartheid in South Africa. “To some extent, Protestantism has always swum against the tide,” notes Graesslé.

The cost of erecting the museum came from private sources, the principal donation coming from Pictet & Cie, one of the biggest private banks in Switzerland, whose founders included descendants of persecuted French Protestants who fled to Geneva and who started the bank 200 years ago. -*Ecumenical News International*