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“Swissness is daring to flaunt conventions”

The Swiss bathroom specialist, Laufen embellishes its logo with a small Swiss cross – signalling a phenomenon which marketing specialists refer to as Swissness. An interview with Béatrice Rüeger, Corporate Communication Manager at Laufen and the art historian and Swissness expert, Klaus Leuschel.

Ms Rüeger – What makes a bathroom a Swissness bathroom?

Rüeger: The concept of Swissness stands for attributes which Swiss products are endowed with. Quality, a specific design and a straightforward approach to function are just three. In a nutshell: People expect a Swissness product to have a certain uniqueness in terms of aesthetics and function.

Mr Leuschel – You have written a book about Swiss design and for years now have devoted yourself to the subject of Swissness. You can't help but notice that the relationship between Switzerland and Swissness displays some ambivalent characteristics.

Leuschel: Indeed it does. My book illustrates that the Swiss interpret Swissness with their own brand of pragmatism. The fashionable Freitag shoulder bags for instance have not to 100% been produced in Switzerland for a long time now (by the way, mainly because it's hard to find seamstresses in this country for this job). And although Laufen manufactures the majority of its bathrooms in Switzerland, it prefers to entrust Italian or German designers with creating new products. But it's not a case of fake labelling. In a rough outline: Swissness is an attitude of mind not a Swissmade mantra, and a lot of it has to do with intelligent design management – I'm German and wrote a book about Swiss design after a double-page in the Züricher SonntagsZeitung researched by me 2 years ago clearly confirmed: The issue at point is the experienced and felt Swissness and far less a bureaucratic



Klaus Leuschel Photo: LAUFEN




Beatrice Rüeger Photo: LAUFEN

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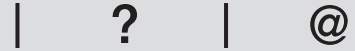


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definition of which percentage is "made in Switzerland".

Rüeger: At Laufen, we interpret Swissness in design as being the best of two schools of design. Bauhaus from the north, Italian design from the south, the whole seasoned with a pinch of French sophistication. It must be said though that our design management team steps in when our German or Italian designers stray from the path of Swissness, or products are in danger of becoming faceless. Swissness is also about daring to seek unconventional solutions. As a small country, the Swiss are used to doing their own thing.

What characterises Swissness in design terms?

Leuschel: Many products like the legendary Swiss potato peeler epitomise design in its purest form, you could also rephrase it as simply good and simply beautiful. Swiss style just doesn't believe in unnecessary frills. Many typical Swissness products have unusually long life cycles – simply because there is no need to improve things that are good or chase up every fashion fad.

Rüeger: In my opinion, one thing Swiss design definitely is not, is compulsively consistent. We have modernist bathroom designs but we would never confine ourselves to merely reproducing Bauhaus look-a-likes for the umpteenth time. We also have bathrooms like Mimo by Laufen – a young, mischievous and colourful bathroom that takes a few risks with design and, with its ornamental elements, even tends to clash a bit with strict architectural tenets. That's certainly something else that Swissness stands for: daring to take risks with design.

Leuschel: Exactly. The Swiss aren't afraid to take chances – look at the Swatch watches by Nicolas Hayek.

Swiss design also has the courage to make a break. The break with the tradition in luxury watches, for instance. And it didn't do a bit of harm.


Rüeger: The primal experience with Swissness is undoubtedly influenced by the ingenious, multifunctional Swiss army knife and mechanical Swiss

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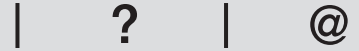


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clock. I find these examples interesting because the two poles clearly illustrate that the democratic and practical, luxurious and prestigious both adorn themselves with the attribute of Swissness.

Leuschel: That's right, Swiss design is not elitist. In the end, all the customer expects is that it's better.

Ms Rüeger, Mr Leuschel – thank you for the interview. ▼

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