



ART & CULTURE

ART & CULTURE

Celebrating with Hans Erni

"Ta panta rei" – these words of 6th-century BC Greek philosopher Heraclitus evoke the permanent flow, or flux, of all things and underpin the philosophy of artist Hans Erni. *Swiss News* pays homage to the Swiss icon in celebration of his 100th birthday.



© All artwork is courtesy of the Hans Erni Foundation, Lucerne

Close-up of a section of the Geneva Peace Wall

By Gail Mangold-Vine | Hans Erni is Switzerland's best-known living artist. His fame as a painter, printmaker and sculptor extends well beyond the nation's borders. And in his own country, thanks to public commissions, posters, reproductions – even Erni-designed postage stamps – he is a household name.

The artist has been a long-time advocate of peace, justice, equality and environmental causes – themes influencing much of his work and around which he has developed a visual language to communicate his messages.

In 2009, the artist and his 82-year-old wife Doris also captured public imagination by celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary (in a country where over 48 per cent of marriages end in divorce). This event was only surpassed by the artist's celebration – on February 21, 2009 – of his 100th birthday.

Thumbnail sketch of the artist

One of seven children, Erni was born in Lucerne. His father was a ship mechanic who worked on lake boats. Schooled from his early teens as a technical draftsman, Hans Erni later received art training in Lucerne, Paris and Berlin. In the 1930s and '40s – by now a full-fledged and highly committed artist, first in an abstract and then progressively a figurative style – Erni travelled widely. In addition to paintings, sculpture and graphics, he created numerous murals in Switzerland and abroad, plus designed theatrical sets and costumes. He had his first museum show at Lucerne's art museum in 1944; his first Swiss stamp saw the light of day in 1949.

More world-travel, the first awards, ever more public and corporate projects, major exhibits and work with new media such as

mosaics, ceramics, tapestries and book illustrations marked the '50s through '70s. In 1979, the Hans Erni Museum was inaugurated at the Swiss Museum of Transport in Lucerne.

The artist's fame and prolific production continue to grow even to this day, but contrary to appearance all has not been roses. Erni and his wife have both been maligned in Switzerland for his open world-view. Members of the "art intelligentsia" have derided his work's supposed slickness. And he experienced the accidental death of a beloved first wife and later their young daughter, who died of leukaemia.

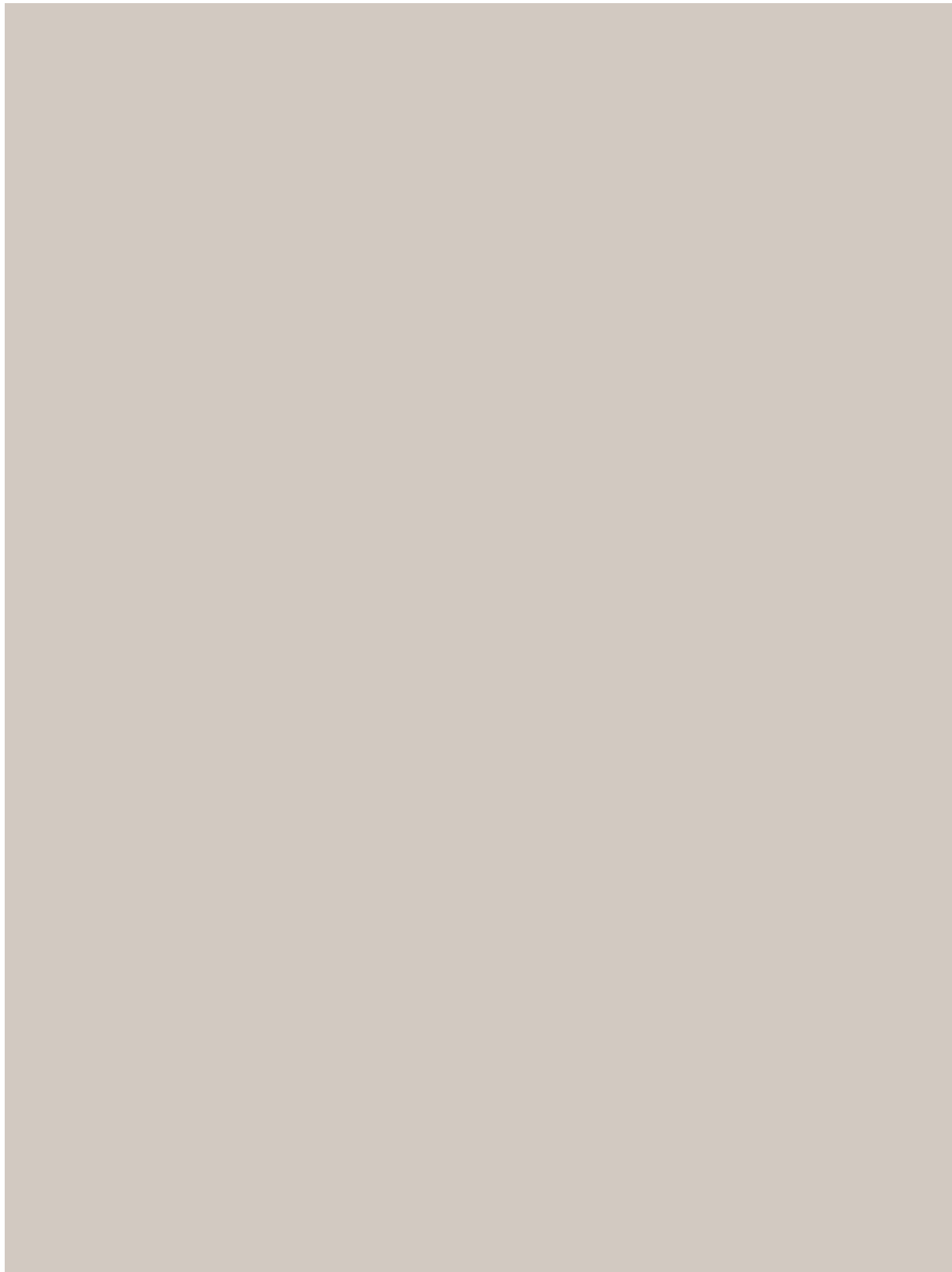
In his centenary year, aside from a slew of retrospectives, achievement awards, the publication of two (more) books about him – some 20 major books and catalogues have appeared since 1979 – and the issue of two Erni-designed Swiss stamps, Switzer-



Hans and Doris Erni

© Kunstmuseum Luzern / Priska Ketterer





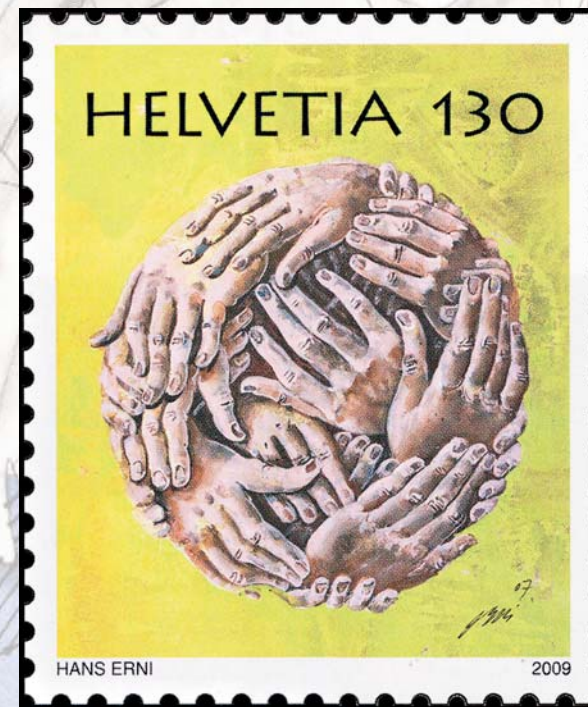
land's national Knie Circus asked Erni to design their 2009 season poster for the ninth time. And on June 6, another event took place: the unveiling of *Ta Panta Rei* (which the artist writes *Tu Panta Rei*), a ceramic wall piece flanking the main gates of the United Nations European headquarters in Geneva.

The inauguration of the Geneva Peace Wall

For the ceremony on Place des Nations attended by some 500 people, an open, flower-bedecked pavilion had been set up across from the wall. There was a podium for speakers, a band and a big buffet. Splendid weather undoubtedly also contributed to the unusual festiveness of the occasion.

Walking with a cane but at quite a clip, Erni arrived natively dressed in grey slacks with a hound's tooth jacket, stylish black moccasins and designer tie. For someone who projects a tall presence in photographs, he is surprisingly slight of stature in real life.

After listening to speeches delivered by Geneva Mayor Rémy Pagni, State Councillor Laurent Moutinot (who fondly recalled the Erni lithograph that was a fixture of his childhood home), Federal Councillor Micheline Calmy-Rey, and Sergei Ordzhonikidze, director general of the UN in Geneva, Erni himself gave a speech in French. He also: received the Personality of the Year award from the Foreign Press Association, cut the ribbon as the drapes covering the wall fell away, posed for a blitz of media shots, and then sat for an extended autograph session during which large numbers of guests thronged around him, extending catalogues and pieces of paper – a young Asian couple even proffered empty pages of their passports – to receive a small signed drawing executed in his sure hand.



"Menschenhand" stamp, 2009

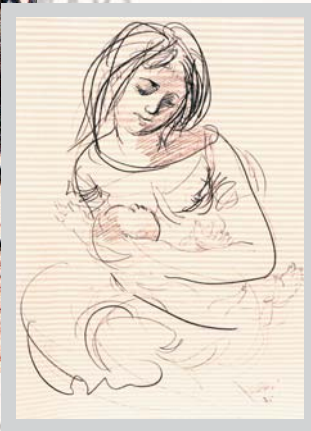


Erni's iconic Peace Dove, 1984

ART & CULTURE



Mother with Child, 1975



In one endless flowing line, Erni created for his fans mostly doves, but some people got lovers – another favourite Erni motif. With drawings and plain autographs alike, he swooped his pen around in a circle to end the movement in a symbol of harmony and unity.

Apparently not fatigued by any of this, Erni then sat down for a TV-interview and told the interviewer he'd been studying the wall since it was unveiled ... and was thinking maybe it needed to be extended on both sides – an idea he was going to work on first-thing when he got back to his studio.

Making the UN “transparent”

As I watched Erni, with his trademark tousled hair and still-handsome features, his good nature and a smile as ready and open as a child's, I thought of what he had told me the previous day during a phone interview about the *Mur de la Paix*, or Peace Wall.

“The wall is meant to connect the important work that is going on inside the building with the aspirations of all of us on the outside to achieve a truly universal message,” he said. By expressing the core issues of the UN on the wall, he sought to make the UN “transparent” and the wall a symbol of what unites – not separates – all things. He believes “universality can become a reality”.

If this sense of unity and flow is the message that has consistently nurtured Erni's art (and his way of expressing it clearly holds enormous appeal), at the ceremony something else came to the fore. His persona, and creative, productive longevity were also cause for celebration. As if by his very presence, he was communicating aspirational and inspirational heart-to-heart messages of energy and hope that resonated as a vision and model for a long life, well lived. This, fused with the universal values espoused on *Ta Panta Rei* itself, made the inauguration the extraordinarily vibrant and energising occasion that it was.

Hans Erni's Peace Wall: *Ta Panta Rei*

In two parts, on either side of the flag-decked entrance gate to the European headquarters of the United Nations, leading off from Place des Nations, the work is two metres (6.5 feet) high and 60 metres (around 197 feet) long.

Predominantly blue, it features classic Erni iconography in which the dove of peace figures prominently. The work was mounted by craftsmen who spent a month assembling hundreds of weatherproof tiles onto which Erni's drawings – first scanned into a computer – had been projected, and then spray-painted using new, experimental technology.

The wall was commissioned by the City of Geneva, but it was not Erni's first Geneva project. Others include a corporate commission from Rolex and the *Homage to Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, adorning the façade of the Manor department store now occupying the site of the house where the philosopher was born.

Switzerland celebrated joining the UN in 2002 with an exhibition of Erni's paintings, drawings, sculptures, book illustrations and tapestries at the UN in Geneva.

Erni was a guest at World Meteorological Day celebrations at the WMO headquarters in 2006, when an exhibition of his paintings entitled “Forces of Nature” was staged.

And in 2007, the Geneva cantonal government presented former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan with his portrait, painted by Erni, to be hung in the UN's New York headquarters.

More about Hans Erni:
www.hans-erni.ch and www.verkehrshaus.ch