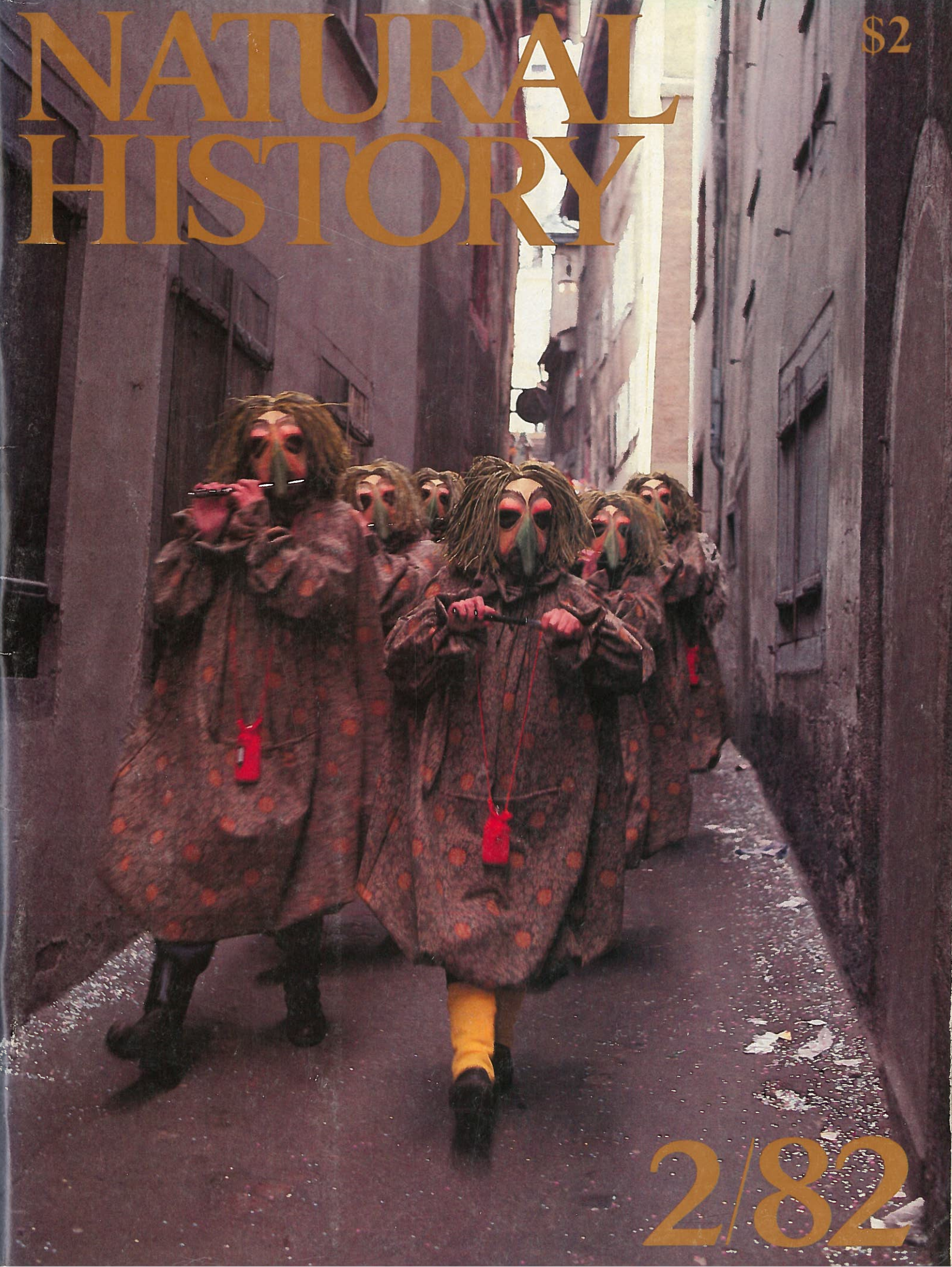


NATURAL HISTORY

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Enchantment of the Fasnacht

Tradition and propriety rule Basel's carnival

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It is just before four o'clock on a cold winter morning in Basel, Switzerland's industrial, yet charming, inland port. Normally, the city would be dark and deserted at this hour, with only a few stragglers wending their way home after the bars have closed. But because this is the Monday after Ash Wednesday, all the cafés and bars are still open, and every inch of space in the downtown area is taken up by people from Basel and beyond. It is the morning of the *Morgeschtraich*, the "morning stroke" or "morning prank" that opens the Fasnacht, Basel's yearly carnival.

At the stroke of four, every light in Basel, in every home and on every street, is extinguished. The suddenness and completeness of the blackout is a visual shock, yet there is barely time to take it in, for already the music has begun: a slow, rhythmic tune, played in unison on high-pitched pipe and droning drum, arises from all the streets and alleyways in central Basel. And now the players emerge; lit by lanterns borne on their heads, they float through the crowds, their faces hidden behind ghoulish and sad-faced masks.

For a moment the crowd stands hushed, caught by the spell. Then the excitement takes over, the pushing starts, and one must follow the swaying mass until it unravels itself. Throughout the rest of the night and into the dawn the people walk around, following different groups on their journey through the town, taking their first look at the intricately crafted costumes, and crowding into restaurants for the traditional Fasnacht food—bland flour soup and onion pie. The spell comes and goes as the experience of the carnival competes



Observers are easy to distinguish from active participants in the Fasnacht, Basel's yearly carnival. Dominating the carnival are the Cliquen, groups that are costumed according to chosen themes and whose members play piccolos and drums. Here, a Clique makes its way down confetti-covered streets during one of the afternoon parades that mark the three-day celebration.

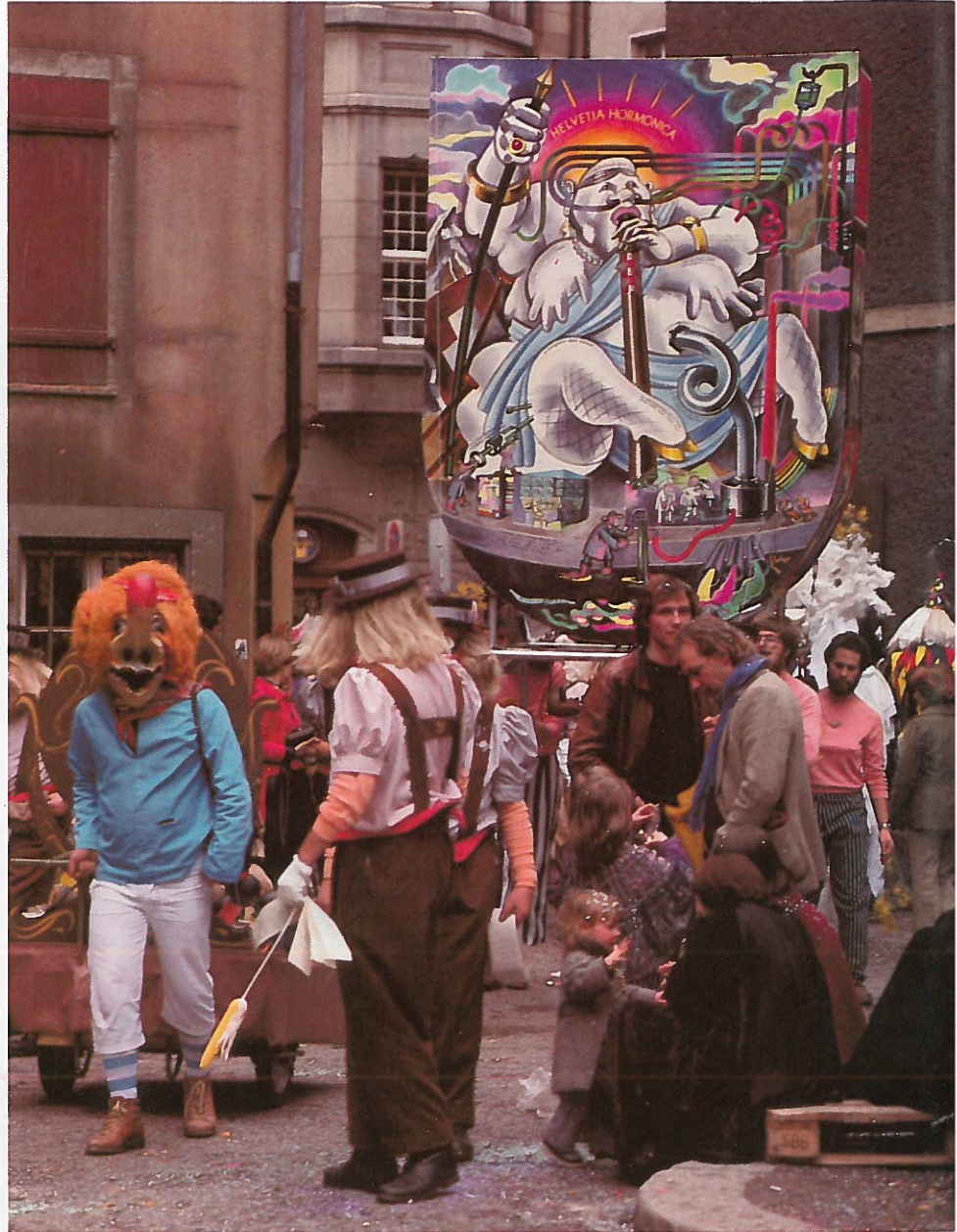


Below: A Clique displays its theme on a beautifully rendered sujet lantern, which, according to custom, is unsigned. Even Marc Chagall did not sign the lantern he painted one year. Right: A caricature of the Alsatian peasant, a Waggis rides a hay wagon from which confetti is thrown at the crowds.

with the normal socializing of people out for a good time. At 5:00 A.M., while waiting for a table in a restaurant, I casually looked out into the dark courtyard from a second-story window—there below me, a group of harlequins, illuminated by their lanterns, slowly circled in rhythmic pace to the music. I called my friends over, and we watched, transported back in time.

European-style carnivals are thought to have originated in Babylon and can be traced through Roman Saturnalias. Since so many other societies around the world have festivals with similar elements, however, they all may have an even older derivation. The elements associated with these festivals include the suspension of ordinary routines and a reversal of roles—the lowly are raised high, the jester becomes king or priest, men act as women and women as men, humans turn into animals. All participants are masked and wear costumes. The disguises facilitate a general relaxation of rules, resulting in varying degrees of licentiousness and the freedom to criticize neighbors or town officials, usually through satire. During the Middle Ages all sorts of social breaches—especially illicit liaisons and unusual marriages—were the targets of embarrassing carnival antics. Today the aggression is playful and relatively indiscriminate. In Nice, flowers are thrown; in Basel, confetti.

Historically, European carnivals existed in an uneasy relationship to the authorities, being alternately condoned as a safety valve and banned as sacrilegious and dangerous. These fears were not unfounded. During the carnival of 1376 in Basel, a rebellion broke out





against the ruling Austrians, culminating in the beheading of twelve citizens and the banishment of the city from the empire. In 1529, masqueraders entered the Basel Cathedral and Assembly Hall and forced the government to yield to a wider democratization of its laws. France and Germany also have had their share of carnival rebellions.

The Christian church incorporated carnivals as a pre-Lenten festival, but they became less widespread in Europe following the Reformation, which abolished most festivals as well as the Lenten season. Industrialization, with its emphasis on labor productivity, also may have curtailed such recreation. The extravagant silliness of carnivals, which "wasted" time as well as money, could not be tolerated once a person's time was given a monetary value. Neverthe-

less, carnivals are celebrated today in some form in scattered cities in Belgium, France, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, Hungary, Russia, Austria, and Germany, as well as Switzerland. Basel is the only major Protestant city that still holds a traditional carnival. To separate the Fasnacht from religious associations, Baslers begin their three-day festival on the Monday after Ash Wednesday, a week later than most carnivals are held and after Catholics have already begun Lent. (In 1982, the Fasnacht begins March 1.)

There are several ways people can participate actively in the Basel Fasnacht. The formal groups that make up the large parades are the *Cliquen*, the *Guggemuusig* groups, and the *Waggiswage*. The *Cliquen* are the main organizations, groups of 25 to 200 people

who wear costumes and masks and play piccolos and drums. The large *Cliquen* are divided into two or three more or less independent divisions. Counting divisions separately, there are about 100 such groups, with an average of forty people in each.

The *Cliquen* open the festivities with the *Morgeschtraich*, and they provide the musical undertone for the festival. Many of the traditional tunes are fife-and-drum marches that were brought home by Swiss mercenary soldiers. On Monday and Wednesday afternoons, all the *Cliquen* march together in a parade and present their themes for the year—painted on huge, rectangular *sujet* lanterns, outlined in handbills, and often expressed in the costumes themselves. At other times they wander through the town, either as individuals or in small groups, playing their instruments and seemingly lost to the world behind their masks.

Considerable training is required to be a member of a *Clique*, as only expert drummers and pipers are allowed. One must also have a certain amount of cash to pay for the costume and the mask. Through the sale of Fasnacht *Plaketten*, or "pins," some, but not all, of this outlay is recovered. In return for their devotion, the participants experience the joys of membership, ranging from near obsession with Fasnacht themes to a genuine sense of brotherhood (and sisterhood—women are also participants, though not in equally large numbers). This sense of community, arising from mutual experience, was considered to be a *Clique's* most remarkable aspect by one former member. Another told me of the tears that end the final ball as the



Left: Masks of a Guggemuusig group lie in wait while the musicians take a break. Only grudgingly tolerated by some tradition-minded Baslers, Guggemuusig groups play out-of-tune distortions of marches and Dixieland jazz tunes. Below: To embarrass or fluster observers, masked participants engage in playful assaults using confetti or verbal teasing.

members realize they must go about their separate concerns until the next carnival season. Like college or fraternity ties, Fasnacht connections form a network that can be called upon when there is a need for special favors.

A second large body of participants are members of *Guggemuusig* groups, a recent addition to the Fasnacht. These are similar to the *Cliquen* in that each member of a particular group will wear a variation on a chosen costume and each must play an instrument, but the music itself is a parody. *Guggemuusig*, literally translated, means "music from paper bags." As one man explained, "If you took an old paper bag and blew into it, you wouldn't have very good music, would you?" *Guggemuusig* musicians play out-of-tune distortions of traditional marches and Dixieland jazz tunes, in the style of Mardi Gras musicians. Their instruments range from real drums and horns to noisemakers improvised from vacuum cleaner tubes and toilet fixtures. *Guggemuusig* groups officially debut on Tuesday night with a concert and large parade, although some come out earlier. Within the Fasnacht they are an energetic contrast to the marching tunes of the *Cliquen*, whose music is lovely but repetitious.

A third—and expensive—means of participating in the parades is to bring in a *Waggiswaage*, a large hay wagon loaded with flowers, oranges, confetti, and candy with which to pelt the crowds. The *Waggis* who ride the wagon wear wooden clogs and masks topped with wild, bushy hair, often colored bright green or orange. They are caricatures of the Alsatian peasants who for centuries have come to Basel market-



places, hawking fruits and vegetables.

There are also several less formal ways of participating. Increasingly popular are groups of two to eight people who, like the members of *Cliquen*, roam the streets playing piccolos and drums. Although they are referred to as *Schyssdragg-ziigli* ("little nothings"), these groups have as many people as the *Cliquen* themselves. Unlike the *Cliquen*, however, they do not march in the official parades or prepare topical *sujet* lanterns and handbills; they are also considered more anarchistic.

Other people choose to be part of a *Schnitzelbangg* group (the name is derived from a term for "town crier"). These small groups of two to six people travel through certain cafés on the Monday and Wednesday nights of the carnival and recite satirical verses, accompa-

nied by some form of music (a child's toy piano will do) and illustrated with posters or props. The subject of the satire generally comes from the past year's news, and local politicians, who are more or less required to make an appearance at one of the cafés on the circuit, are often mocked. In this the *Schnitzelbangg* groups differ from the *Cliquen*, whose satires generally exclude local issues. And while the members of a *Clique* organize and practice their presentation months in advance, a *Schnitzelbangg* group need only submit its topic to a jury on the Friday before the carnival, to insure that the performance is up to standard and that the subject matter is not obscene.

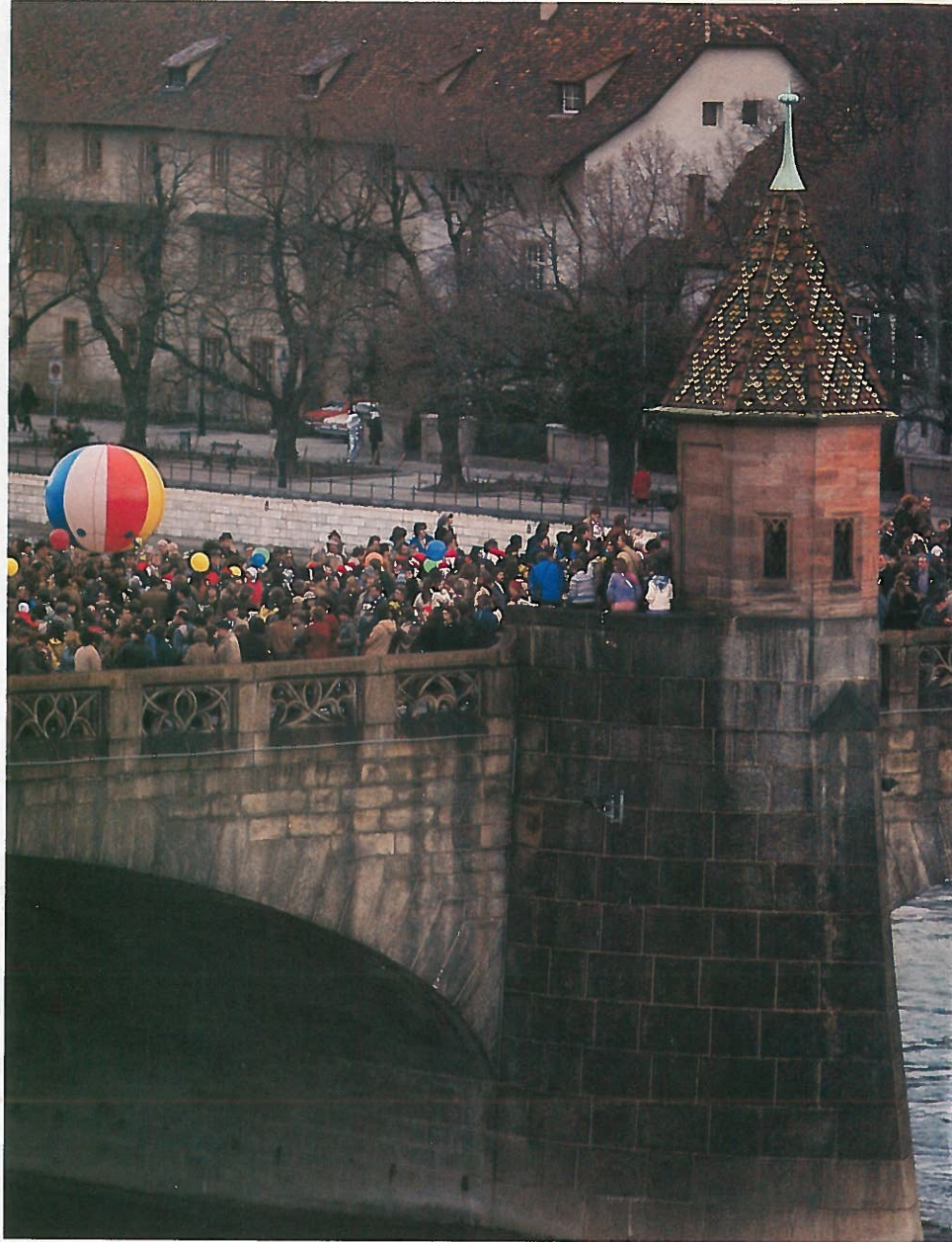
Finally, one may decide to go it alone—as an *Einzelmaske*, or "single mask." This may be a particularly out-

On the Monday and Wednesday afternoons of the three-day carnival, participants march together in large parades through streets lined with observers. Below: A parade crosses the Rhine on the ancient Mittlere Bridge.

landish costume or a traditional one, such as the *Waggis*, the *Alte Tante* ("old aunt"), or the *Kritte* ("sexy, sassy girl"). Those who venture out in traditional roles are expected to *intrigieren*, to verbally assault innocent bystanders or chosen targets with showers of clever invectives concerning anything from the clothes their victims are wearing to vague allusions to their pasts.

Participants in the Fasnacht come from a cross section of Basel citizenry. Translated into contemporary Swiss terms, this means anyone from the middle or upper class. In the industrial and business centers there is really no lower class among the citizens of Switzerland. That position is occupied by foreign workers, generally Italians, Yugoslavs, Greeks, Turks, and Spaniards.

During the outdoor celebrations of the Fasnacht there is a clear separation between participants and observers: participants are the only ones permitted to wear masks and costumes. Sometimes youths from France or Germany will try to join in the fun by getting dressed up and putting on a mask, but this is frowned upon. The special quality of Basel's Fasnacht is that it remains traditional. Participants in the parades must belong to one of the traditional groups (and even the *Guggemuusig* groups are only grudgingly tolerated by some, who feel that they approach the general unruliness and obscenity associated with German carnivals). The closest an observer can come to being an active part of the Fasnacht is to fall in step behind the members of a particular *Clique*, following them in their meanderings through the town. Indoors, in the restaurants, the distinctions become blurred,





as participants take off their masks to indulge in wine and food; and late at night, nonparticipants join the others in masked balls.

The *Komitee* that oversees the celebrations is a small group of men from the older *Cliquen*. This conservative body is in charge of selling the Fasnacht *Plaketten* and distributing the funds back to the *Cliquen*. They set up a stand on the parade route where points are awarded to the *Cliquen* for the effort, talent, and originality shown in their costumes, masks, and lanterns. This point system helps to determine how much money will be distributed to the various groups. Other criteria include the number of members in a *Clique* and the number of times that it passes by the stand. Groups are thus rewarded for conforming to the ordered route.

The *Komitee* also insures that participants stay within certain bounds of propriety. For instance, one year a *Schnitzelbagg* pair illustrated their theme with a poster using the graffiti shorthand for male genitalia as part of a man's face. The *Komitee* found this obscene and rejected the poster, so the pair placed a "censored" band over it—but at each restaurant they offered revellers a peek.

This sense that there are limits on what is acceptable is what sets the Basel Fasnacht apart from other carnivals, especially those in neighboring Germany. While other carnivals imply licentiousness and sexual freedom, the Fasnacht attempts to steer clear of anything touching on vulgarity. Only at the balls late at night is flirting with other than one's life partner permitted, although I was told that some couples

separate on Monday at 4:00 A.M. and do not see each other until Thursday—no questions asked. In Germany parades may contain floats of huge women with their breasts bared and legs outspread; in Basel, however, the humor is most definitely not lewd, but rather political, and often focuses on exaggerations and word plays on the Basel dialect. At one point during the Fasnacht, I passed by a statue of a man holding a cigar. Someone had placed a bratwurst in its mouth and an empty bottle in its extended hand, and had wrapped the body with paper streamers. When I returned a short time later with my camera, these decorations had all been removed. Evidently someone else felt this mild playfulness was overly disrespectful.

Other Swiss towns holding carnivals allow somewhat more individual creativity and a slightly more general release. In Zurich, the carnival is relatively new, and consists mostly of masqueraders roaming from café to café, playing tricks, singing songs, getting drunk, and eventually ending up at the artists' ball, which culminates at 6:00 A.M. with a long snake dance. Lucerne holds a more traditional carnival, with parades similar to, but not so elaborate as, Basel's. As the official parade wanders through Lucerne, it is met by a "students'" parade, which includes pantomime as well as masquerades. Groups build their own stage sets on the streets and perform skits in them. One year a group dressed as mice erected a portable cage with a large wheel. They used the wheel to demonstrate how adept the human-sized mice were at completing their tricks. Compared with the extravagances we associate with Mardi Gras in

Overleaf: Each Fasnacht mask and costume is beautifully finished. Some of the disguises are witty and satirical, while others—like those of these piccolo players—evoke ages gone by.







Left: Separating from the overwhelming crowds, participants may wander individually or in small groups, playing their musical instruments. Below: Brass horns are their mainstay, but the Guggemuusig musicians also improvise their own odd noisemakers.

New Orleans and Rio, however, these kinds of revelry certainly seem tame.

In many ways, any form of carnival seems to be an anomaly in Switzerland. The Swiss see themselves as a "little people" who must hold together against the larger countries that surround them. Since their nation is divided into French-, Italian-, and German-speaking areas, as well as into Catholic and Protestant populations, the Swiss have had to suppress their natural allegiances in order to forge a national identity. This has taken the form of a self-conscious control over their lives, and is evident in the way the Swiss monitor themselves and others, in their conservatism, and in their products, which are known for quality of craftsmanship. Schedules are adhered to, streets are immaculate, crime is very low, and trams run on an honor system that is actually obeyed. Perhaps most telling are the international relationships of the Swiss. Their neutrality in international affairs insulates them against what they cannot hope to control. They also insulate themselves through their policy toward the foreign workers who make up about one-fifth of the population. Because their labor is necessary, these workers are welcome to remain in the country, but they are seldom granted citizenship. In this way, Switzerland can remain unaffected by world population movements and provide a high standard of living for its small, well-educated citizenry.

The strong sense of law and order that characterizes Switzerland would appear to resist the lifting of rules implicit in a carnival. And, indeed, participation is controlled in the Basel carnival, a show-piece of creativity in which the objects



to be satirized are often from outside Basel, if not outside Switzerland. The satires concern many issues: male chauvinism, feminism, the new McDonald's franchise in Basel (the first such fast-food establishment and an innovation not generally appreciated), gas prices, jogging, American presidents, Margaret Thatcher. In 1980, when French-speaking people in the Bern canton were agitating for a separate canton (eventually they succeeded), Baslers satirized the separatists. Even the anarchistic youth riots that shocked the northern cities in 1980 became a target of the 1981 Fasnacht. Although the political impact of the satires is limited, they may give Baslers some sense of control over perplexing issues. In addition, they are an important outlet for an educated body of people who, living in a nation that has backed off from public international involvements, have few means of expressing themselves about political matters beyond their borders.

The Fasnacht can be seen as an affirmation of Basel and its traditional values, which are held stubbornly against the encroachment of foreign ways. The intricate costumes, masks, and lanterns; the music, wit, and structured order of the carnival are, for the Baslers, a statement that they can celebrate without losing their civilized behavior. They also celebrate themselves explicitly by making constant jokes and references to the "Basler Bebbi," just as people in the northeastern United States might refer to themselves as "Yankees." In 1980 little flags were distributed with the slogan *Bebbi an der Macht* ("baby to power"), referring to hopes that the canton of the city of Basel would obtain



representation on the seven-member Federal Council, the executive body of Switzerland. The exaggerated use of their dialect—for example, in pointed jabs at Zurich, their economic and social rival—is another way that Baslers celebrate their identity. Even the spelling *Fasnacht* stands as an expression of superiority and iconoclasm: for Germanic carnivals elsewhere, the spelling *Fastnacht* is used.

At the same time, the carnival itself cannot help but transform the city. In the central downtown area of Basel, traffic is prohibited for the three days of the festival. One may wander down the middle of the largest streets, now softened by the pastel shades of fallen confetti. There is always some new costume or an intricate lantern to inspect, and there is no reason to fear missing an act, because the action is occurring everywhere. The music permeates the town, drifting into the apartments of those who attempt to hide from the carnival atmosphere; routines are upset by the hours of the celebration, and work is only intermittent. Many of the spectators, along with the participants, even change the way they walk, taking on a common swaying dance step—a pause and a step, a pause and a step—swinging their legs out and around in time to the music. Although not all Baslers at-

tend it (many escape the town for the ski slopes), the Fasnacht does bridge social boundaries, neutralizing them for a brief period of time.

For 362 days during the year, Basel is a town that also holds a carnival. Once the *Morgeschtraich* darkens the city, however, Basel becomes a mere back-drop, and Baslers are forced to accept a new definition of what is normal. Such an event, experienced individually, could be frightening and alienating, but the theater of the carnival transforms the experience into a communal celebration of what is possible beyond the conventions of daily life.

The disturbance of routines helps Baslers to witness the created nature of their social life. For that is what any festival does: it points out the force of the order within which people live, while at the same time giving them a short break from that order. This substitution is a critique of the general routine, but in this case also reinforces it, by showing how crazy, how disorienting life would be if people weren't bound by routine. By staying up for three nights in a row, Baslers recognize the need for sleep. By walking around behind a mask, unable to show any kind of expression, they learn the importance of real communication.

At 6:00 A.M. on the Thursday following the Fasnacht, one can still see *Cliquen* on the street, now carrying their masks under their arms, in a tired shuffle home. As the sun rises over Basel that morning, the last traces of confetti are being cleaned up, the traffic begins to move freely, and the city is once again transformed, this time back to a center of serious business. □