



Artful Sleighs

The collection of the State Museum of Zurich

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The collection of sledges at the State Museum of Zurich is the most important in Switzerland and is of international importance. These are horse-drawn sleighs used for the transport of people, not commercial vehicles, nor children's sleighs, therefore, sleighs for trips, parades or festive occasions. It is a collection that has been expanding since the early 1900s and which offers the visitor, for the most part, decorated or painted sledges, in the spirit of the Museum, which exhibits objects of figurative arts.

For decades the sleds remained in the basement of the main wing of the Museum, almost without any care or restoration until 2006, when a systemic conservation campaign was launched together with a catalog project entrusted to Andres Furger. Since then, the restored sledges (late 17th - early 19th century) have been on display. The prevailing type in the collection is the so-called “racing sled,” in which a rider or a coachman drove the vehicle from behind and a lady sat in front of him, sideways on the bench. The term “racing sled,” was used frequently in Switzerland until the 1900s to

Above: Watercolor by Johann Jakob Beck from 1836. Two figured sledges: the first in the form of a bear and the second with a gilded lion figure. The cavelli with harnesses with bells and adorned with brightly colored plumes. The riders wear livery and bicorne and drive from behind. The ladies are seated sideways.

refer to light, decorated, or figured sleds, referring to when “Corsa” meant a jousting tournament or “sled carousel.”

Main Models

The racing sleds were distinguished in simple, graceful models, with the skates that continue upwards to form a triangle, which ended at the top with a decoration, usually a figure such as a deer, a lion, a dove, or an eagle. The body of the sled can take the form of an animal in the front, a tiger, a lion, or other depending on the choices, which depended on the customer of the master carpenter.

The figured sleds were considered luxury models, used exclusively for the transport of passengers mainly in the city. This typology also included the “family sleighs” pulled by several horses, on whose benches up to four people and



Right: Box sleigh from around 1750 from Fischingen TG with paintings on the theme of winter fun.

Detail of the painting on the sleigh: a gentleman driving a lady in a racing sleigh.

a couple of children could sit. Until the early 1800s, family sleighs were driven from the coachman's station at the back. They were used in winter as luxury carriages, that is, as a convenient means of transport for those who could afford to keep one or more horses. They were equipped with headlights, brakes and front mudflaps. The deluxe sleigh rides involved the coachman or groom, wearing colorful uniforms.

The Structure

Luxury sleds were made by various local craftsmen based on a model or drawing. In particular, the master drive (loom), the blacksmiths (iron parts), the carpenters (case), the sculptors (for the figures and the carvings), the painters and gilders (for the painting and decorations) were involved, and saddlers (to create in fabric or leather and harnesses for horses). Usually the frame of the sled was composed of two hardwood skates, mostly metal shod. Most of the 18th century sledges already had shod skates, but previously hard birch wood was used for the construction of the skates. Later they

chose ash or red beech, the wood was worked by the wheelwright who steam-bent it into the strongly curved shape and reinforced it, at the end, with an iron blade to facilitate sliding. Sometimes in the front part of the frame, where the skates covered, a splash guard was also inserted in the 18th century. The tow hooks for the two tie rods, or poles, were bolted to the frame at the front. The horse, usually single, pulled the light, mostly two-seater vehicle with long poles. The traction system was of two types with simple wooden poles, or as for the chariots, with tension ropes attached to the poles.

Four legs connected to the body rested on skates, which in turn were connected to each other with crossbars. The rider was seated just behind the lady and the driver's seat was raised slightly so that he could look forward beyond his companion or lady. He usually rested his feet on the rear ends of the skates, where the footrests were attached. The production of the body required the skill of a simple carpenter, so they often turned to the local carpenter. Most of the bodies in the collection of the State Museum were created in this way, so the shape also reflects a regional flare.

The Decoration

Between the simple and the richly decorated, there were various degrees. Most of the sleds were painted, or carved and painted. As a rule, each sleigh had its own figurative theme, sometimes combined with the shape of the sleigh's body itself. The decorations correspond both to the stylistic tendencies of the respective period of production (baroque, rococo, neoclassicism) and to those of the region of



The "woman's shoe" is a sled with a figured body belongs to the Rococo period and was probably used during the carnival period in masked parades. Rococo art is marked by exceptionally ornamental and theatrical decoration. It was popular in France and Italy from 1730 to 1760.

SLEIGHS



A) Sledge with figured demonized box "Tritone" from the castle of Altishofen, (Canton of Lucerne, Switzerland) 17th century. A side view highlights two sea monsters and Triton, a mythological figure. The skates come together in the shape of a sea snake.

B) Figuren-Reitschlitten, horse-drawn sleigh known as the "Lion from Appenzell" from 1750. Sculpted bench, on which the lady and knight can sit. The coat of arms of the family between the paws of the lion. Towing hooks visible on the frame and two-pointed iron brake on the rear, which prevented the vehicle from sliding backwards. Platform for lateral access and support hook. The lion is imposing and majestically positioned.

C) Box of the figure sledge "Horse" from around 1700. The box probably belonged to a sledge made in the Upper Rhine region by Comte du Luc. From 1708 to 1715 he was the French ambassador to Switzerland.

D) Wurstschlitten or Sausage Sled with bagpipe player. The theme is the music, a game of bagpipes and post horn. This last one is played by the mustached character with a little dog peeking out from among the legs. It shows the transitions to the figura sleigh, i.e. the luxury sleigh model used in the city.





Sledge with two-seater chest vis a vis XVIII century, called "Little Dragon," with a pink tin box. A coat of arms adorns the front. The decorations recall those of the furniture of the Canton of Grisons. The Grisons is Switzerland's largest canton and lies fully within the Alps.

Paraden - Maskeraden - Promenaden: Die Schlitten des Schweizerischen Landesmuseums im europäischen Kontext is Andres Furger's original text. It is available in German at <https://www.academia.edu/5677683>.

production. The sleds show interesting iconographic themes such as joie de vivre, music, and animals. Above all, the subjects of figured sports sleds embody fantastic worlds, such as allegorical figures, hybrid creatures or, in some cases, wild animals. Often their tongues were mounted to swing back and forth while driving. There are also references to mechanisms for moving the tongue by hand or more sophisticated devices such as a bellows inserted in the animal's body, with which movement could be triggered. Sometimes, family coats of arms or similar were placed on the front of the sled. Other important decorative features of the sleds were the bells, sewn on the richly embroidered horse blankets, and the feathers on the branding. In addition, there were blankets in fabric and fur, necessary equipment for the passenger(s), and, finally, the special attire of the coachman or groom.

Four Types

Simple classic sleighs had a body, where the passenger sat. There were bodies in which one or two people could sit (one person, two people one behind the other in the direction of travel or sitting facing each other). The driver's seat was usually at the back. The simple sports sleds, on the other hand, had a bench, sometimes padded to be used as a riding saddle or on which the lady sat in front of the side facing the direction of travel. This is demonstrated by the climbing aids or by the marks left on the wood of the box. In addition, the bench featured a handle or a slot in the front, so that the lady could hold onto the seat during the quick and uneven driving.

The two types described are called *Kastenschlitten* or "box" and *Wurstschlitten* or "horse riding" and could also be characterized by a refined figura-



Family sleigh called "Conchiglia," circa 1850. Two main seats on the back and in front of the child seats. Their folding backrest allows the front bench to become the driver's seat. The rear part also has room for a coachman or a household servant.

tive design and this made them more "luxury." The *Figurenschlitten* were decorated box sleds, where the box was part of a figured and carved image, while the *Figuren-Reitschlitten* were figured riding sleds and the whole body of the sled assumed the shape of the chosen theme. During the 19th century, sleighs with carriage-shaped boxes for multiple people appeared, which were called "family" sleighs, also luxury sleighs.

The different models, the ever richer and more imaginative versions, the vaporizations introduced testify to the long period of use of the sled in Switzerland, and in the Alpine areas in general. Surely a visit to the State Museum of Zurich will guide you to discover how this vehicle, useful and ingenious, was linked to the pleasure, the enjoyment of the owners and the art and creativity of the various craftsmen. ~