

The Lion of Lucerne

Background

Danish sculptor, Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844), was the most famous sculptor in Europe when he was asked to create a monument to the Swiss soldiers who died in the French Revolution. From 1820-1821 German craftsman, Lukas Ahorn, carved the monument into the side of a cliff according to Thorvaldsen's design.

Some 650 Swiss soldiers were killed in Paris as they sought to protect the French royal family of Louis XVI from an attack on the Tuileries Palace (August 10, 1792), which essentially initiated the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution. Many of the Swiss soldiers were beheaded and their bodies desecrated. Within months the entire royal family was exterminated.



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Arti-Facts

- The sculpture is 33 ft. in length and 20 ft. high (compare to the people standing on ground in the above photo), making this lion three times the size of the lion statues in front of the New York Public Library.
- It is carved into the face of a mountain that was once a sandstone quarry used to build the city of Lucerne.
- Mark Twain, in his book *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), called the dying lion statue "the most mournful and moving piece of stone in the world." Notice the broken shaft of a lance protruding from the lion's left flank.
- The Latin inscription above the niche, *Helvetiorum Fidei Ac Virtuti*, reads "To the fidelity and virtue of the Swiss"; *Helvetia* is the Latin name for Switzerland.
- Thorvaldsen is also known for his exquisite statue of Christ (for Copenhagen Cathedral) as well as statues of other famous people such as Copernicus, Gutenberg, and Pope Pius VII (for St. Peter's Basilica).