

Uncovering ETH Zurich's global past

Revisiting the early history of ETH Zurich. For diversity, openness, tolerance, and anti-racism

Since its founding in 1855, ETH Zurich has been shaped by cultural diversity and international exchange. Yet these beginnings also coincided with an era of European high imperialism – a period during which colonial powers expanded their dominance, often through violence, particularly in Asia and Africa. ETH Zurich, too, was connected to these global dynamics, for instance through scientific collaborations and research journeys. At the same time, individuals from the Global South (including Asia, Africa, the Islamic world, and Latin America) were already studying, teaching, and conducting research at ETH. A new initiative is now shedding light on this complex and underexplored chapter of ETH's past.



Revisiting ETH's global past

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Our goal

One key project within this initiative explores the early, often overlooked histories of non-Western students and scholars at ETH Zurich. These individuals carried with them the knowledge they acquired and co-created in Switzerland, applying it in their countries of origin, while also shaping Switzerland's own academic and research landscape.

The project places particular emphasis on their personal experiences, life paths, and the broader historical and

social contexts in which they lived. By critically engaging with this past, the research contributes to a more inclusive and globally attuned institutional memory of ETH Zurich. At the same time, it underscores the lasting significance of non-European contributions to Swiss science and academia – and in doing so, affirms core values such as diversity, tolerance, and intercultural exchange.

Your support enables

- in-depth academic research into little-known aspects of ETH's institutional history;
- thoughtful reflection on memory culture on campus through monuments, images, and symbolic spaces;
- a broad, future-oriented conversation about historical responsibility and the values of diversity, openness,



The Swiss geologist and ETH lecturer Arnold Heim with the surveyor Suriadi on a research expedition through Sumatra, 1928.

ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive



Excursion to the Kanmangafuchi Gorge in Tochigi Prefecture, Japan,
1888.

Photographer: Carl Schröter (colorized)

記

日本植物學會ハ昭和七年
四月四日ノ本會創立五十周年
記念大會ニ於ケル臨
時總集會ノ決議ニ依リ
貴殿ヲ本會ノ名譽會員
ニ推薦ス

昭和七年四月四日

日本植物學會會長三好學



ツエー、ヨット、シエレーテル殿

Certificate of honor, dedicated to Carl Schröter on the 50th anniversary of the Japanese Botanical Society, issued in the name of Miyoshi Manabu, head of the Japanese Botanical Society.

ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive



Tea factory of the Tandjong Keling Company (Zurich) in Pagar Alam (South Sumatra), May 1938.

ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive



Students in front of the main entrance of Tsing Hwa University in Beijing (China), October 1955.

ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive

[Explore ETH's history](#)



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