

Philanthropy: Christoph Merian and the civic foundations

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

A significant part of the wealth of the *Daig* was given to the city. The tradition of civic philanthropy, which goes back to the medieval foundations and to the Erasmus foundation of 1536, reached a high point in the nineteenth century with the bequest of Christoph Merian.

Christoph Merian, born in 1800, was the son of the merchant Christoph Merian-Forcart, whose fortune had been built in the colonial trade and the trade of the Napoleonic period. The younger Merian studied agriculture, managed the family's estates and became one of the richest men in Switzerland. He and his wife Margaretha Merian-Burckhardt had no children and decided to leave their fortune to the city of Basel. After Merian's death in 1858 and his wife's in 1886, the bulk of the fortune passed to the city and was placed in a foundation, the Christoph Merian Foundation, which is administered by the civic community of Basel and devoted to social, cultural and urban purposes.¹

The Christoph Merian Foundation owns extensive real estate in and around Basel, including agricultural estates, and uses its income to support housing, social services, culture, the environment and the development of the city. It is one of the largest foundations of Switzerland and a major landowner in the canton of Basel-Stadt. Its history illustrates the conversion of private wealth into a permanent public endowment. Its governance, by a commission of the civic community, shows how the civic institutions of Basel have preserved their role in the administration of collective wealth.

Other families followed similar paths. The museums of Basel owe much of their collections to gifts and bequests from patrician families. In the twentieth century, Maja Hoffmann-Stehlin, the widow of Emanuel Hoffmann, a son of the founder of Roche, established in 1933 the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, which collects contemporary art and

lends it to the Kunstmuseum Basel. After she later married the conductor Paul Sacher, the Hoffmann and Sacher families became among the most important patrons of art and music in Switzerland.² Part J examines the role of culture and patronage in the identity of Basel.

1 Notes

1. On Christoph Merian (1800–1858), his will and the Christoph Merian Stiftung, which took up its activity after the death of his widow Margaretha Merian-Burckhardt in 1886, see HLS, article "Merian, Christoph"; the publications of the Christoph Merian Stiftung. To be verified. ↩
2. On the Emanuel Hoffmann-Stiftung, founded in 1933 by Maja Hoffmann-Stehlin (later Maja Sacher-Stehlin), and the patronage of the Hoffmann and Sacher families (Paul Sacher Stiftung, Schaulager), see the publications of the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation and HLS, articles "Sacher, Paul" and "Sacher-Stehlin, Maja". To be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-philanthropy-christoph-merian-and-the-civic-foundations