

The palaces of the ribbon lords

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The wealth of the ribbon merchants is visible in the architecture of Basel. In the eighteenth century, the leading families built town houses of a splendour that contrasted with the modesty that the Reformation and the sumptuary laws had long imposed. The most famous are the *Weisses Haus* and the *Blaues Haus*, the White House and the Blue House, built on the *Rheinsprung* above the Rhine in the 1760s and 1770s for the brothers Lukas and Jakob Sarasin, ribbon manufacturers. The two houses, joined by a common courtyard, served as residences, offices and warehouses, their size and elegance expressing the wealth and the ambition of the family.¹

Another example is the *Haus zum Kirschgarten*, built in the 1770s for the ribbon manufacturer Johann Rudolf Burckhardt, which today houses a museum of domestic life of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, part of the Historical Museum of Basel.² The house shows how the ribbon lords lived: in rooms decorated with French furniture, Chinese porcelain, clocks and paintings, served by domestic staff, and conducting their business in offices on the ground floor.

These houses show a change in the culture of the Basel elite. The sumptuary laws of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had been relaxed, so the merchants of the eighteenth century allowed themselves a certain display of wealth, although within limits that distinguished them from the aristocracy of the courts. The façades of their houses were elegant but restrained, with the luxury concentrated in the interiors, visible only to guests. This combination of external restraint and internal comfort remained characteristic of the Basel elite as a visible form of the discretion that Chapter II examines.

1 Notes

1. On the Weisses Haus and Blaues Haus on the Rheinsprung, built for the brothers Lukas and Jakob Sarasin (c. 1763–1775), see the publications of the Denkmalpflege Basel-Stadt; HLS, article "Sarasin". Dates to be verified. ↩
2. On the Haus zum Kirschgarten, built 1775–1780 for Johann Rudolf Burckhardt, today a branch of the Historisches Museum Basel, see the museum's publications. Dates to be verified. ↩

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