

The private banker in the imagination of the financial centre

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The Geneva private banker occupies a singular place in the collective imagination. In the eyes of the public and of the clientele, he embodies continuity, discretion and solidity. He appears in literature, cinema and the media as a figure at once reassuring and mysterious. This image has been cultivated by the houses themselves, which have emphasised their age, their founding families and their independence.

This image has considerable commercial value. It attracts a clientele in search of security and tradition. It distinguishes the Geneva houses from their more recent competitors. It contributes to the reputation of the financial centre as a whole. Yet it also carries risks: it may appear out of step with contemporary demands for transparency, and in public debate it has been associated with the practices of tax concealment that the end of banking secrecy brought to light.

In the twenty-first century, the Geneva houses have sought to renew this image. They emphasise sustainable investment, research, technological innovation and social responsibility, while retaining the references to their history. This evolution illustrates the capacity of a tradition to reinvent itself, provided that it remains faithful to what gives it its value, namely trust.

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