

Memorable Moments

The exhibition “Memory – Moments of Remembering and Forgetting” (from 26 June 2020) at the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) sheds light on the manifold forms and practices by which individuals, groups as well as whole societies experience events, preserve them in memory, and retrieve them at specific moments.

The exhibition opens with personal memories; no matter whether in the form of autograph books, photo albums, souvenirs, or baptism records, they all recall memories of a memorable moment, a special place, or an important person. And, as the exhibition curator Alexander Brust points out, they go to show that memories are commonly associated with material things. Objects bear as well as trigger memories. A wall full of travel souvenirs – in the form of a room-filling type case – exemplifies how even mass-manufactured items can become unique with the aid of biographical memory, and attain meaning and emotional force – from collector plates, to plastiscopes, to snow globes.

The exhibition highlights not only personal moments commonly commemorated such as births, weddings, and death but also major events that affect societies as a whole such as natural disasters, wars, independence days, or the opening of a border. How things are remembered is key here: humans have recourse to a multitude practices, forms, and media to capture and pay tribute to memorable moments. Mind you, occasionally they also simply blank out such events.

Mnemonic devices

Since humans are inclined to forget quickly, they often prefer to rely on the help of mnemonic devices. The second room features a wide selection of such memory supports: Knotted ritual cords help the Nyaura people of the Sepik River (Papua New Guinea) to memorize specific episodes of their foundation myths. In Peru, roughly between 1400 and 1532, the Inca used knotted cords, so-called khipu, to record statistical and military data as well as specific historical events. In Europe, people used tally sticks for similar purposes.

Three rock engravings from the western Sahara featuring animal motifs rank among the oldest artistic expressions in Africa. They probably date back as far as the Neolithic age. Three engraved bamboo tubes from the nineteenth century depict scenes from everyday life of New Caledonia’s indigenous Kanak population, as well as their encounters and struggles with the French colonizers.

Ancestors and genealogies

In many cultures, ancestors continue to impact on the lives of the living. They are venerated in rituals and through sacrifices and brought to life in a multitude of shapes and forms for different purposes. In Indonesia, carved ancestor figures used to make up part of every household.

The world-famous, 8th-century Tikal lintel is a key document for understanding Mayan society, history, and cosmology, and is reminiscent of probably the most powerful Mayan ruler of the time: Yik’in Chan K’awiil of the Tikal dynasty. On the map of Tecamachalco, we find indigenous and European concepts of territory, genealogy, and land ownership next to one another. It features elements of a Mesoamerican pictorial manuscript as well as of a European map. Indigenous nobles began working on it in the mid-16th century for the purpose of asserting rightful claims against the Spanish colonial power.

Reappraisal

Two memorial heads refer to the funeral ceremonies that followed the death of a ruler in the former Kingdom of Benin. The eldest son, and heir to throne, erected an altar in memory of the deceased king by having a memorial head cast in bronze. In the Edo language, the term “remember”, sa-e-y-ama, literally means “to cast a motif in bronze”.

During colonization, the Benin royal palace was stormed and looted by a British punitive expedition in 1897. Over 4,000 objects were carried off to London as booty and sold across the world. In Benin, the theft of artefacts that embodied the memories of kings and the kingdom's history left behind a painful void. In the current debate about the provenance of museum collections, the Benin Bronzes have become a powerful symbol. Today, there is a discussion about how to act on the situation and how restitution could be made.

Written testimonies

Monumental epics and sacred scripts ensure that individual as well as collective experiences and events are never forgotten. The exhibition features Bibles, Tora, Quran, sacred healing scrolls from Ethiopia, as well as Batak medicinal manuscripts from Indonesia. The Ramayana epic from India is presented in a modern, illustrated version designed by the artist Sugandha Iyer.

In the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1980s, sections of the wider population appropriated media for the purpose of recording their own version of history, previously a privilege of the ruling elite class, with regard to issues such as decolonization, the end of the Cold War, apartheid in South Africa, or the rule of South American dictators. Women's movements, subaltern groups, and minorities began creating counter-discourses to the official narratives, thus disclosing the multivocality of collective memory. On fabrics, paintings, and posters, actors from different social strata inscribed their own national narratives and memorial days or vented their critique of dictators and the misuse of state power.

Commemorating the dead

The exhibition ends in memory of the dead; this is a common duty in Europe. Exhibits such as hair art, funeral planks, and grave crosses serve to commemorate the deceased. While in Europe the deceased are solemnly remembered on All Souls Day or on Eternity Sunday, in Mexico the reunion with the deceased is joyfully celebrated in cemeteries on Día de los Muertos. In Lowland South America, on the other hand, mentioning the deceased is taboo in many communities. In Peru, the Matsigenka people even create guardian figures to protect them from the dead.

Museums are not merely keepers of the past. They also help to construct and communicate memories. In other words, they offer room for reflection on the role and meaning of the past in terms of the present and future, thus encouraging us to review our experiences and memories.

In our dual role as actors and observers, we are all involved in the making of history. At the station "Lived History", contemporary witnesses tell of their personal experiences.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Museum was forced to abandon the idea of an official opening. The exhibition is open from Friday, 26 June.

For images from the exhibition, go to our website:

https://www.mkb.ch/de/informationen_services/mediendienste.html