

Grabbing the bull by the horns

“animalistic!”, the new exhibition at Basel’s Museum der Kulturen, shows that without animals there is no culture, and that the relationship between humans and animals is diverse, but also ambivalent.

Animals are all around us and are important players in the lives of humans. Today they are understood to be independent beings with equal rights. Humans nevertheless continue to exert a formative influence on their lives.

The relationship between humans and animals is diverse, but also ambivalent, and is characterized by closeness. Humans appreciate animals, make use of them – but also to the point of exploitation. Humans exercise power over animals, hunt them, and eat them. Animals nevertheless retain a degree of sublimity – and occasionally are even deified.

Through some 350 objects from around the world, the exhibition at the Museum der Kulturen Basel illustrates the relationship between humans and animals. It is arranged in four sections: visitors first walk into a comfortable living room where they get to meet cats and dogs. Next comes a rustic Alpine interior where the emphasis is on the use of animals. Visitors then have to pass through an enclosure past a number of animal traps into an animal fight arena lined with trophies. Finally, in sedate surroundings, visitors can look up at animals and reflect on the relationship between humans and animals.

Protection

Anthropologists early on began to study the role of animals in stories, myths, and rituals. An exhibit such as the figure of elephant-headed Ganesha shows that in some religious systems animals are venerated. Christianity knows animals as votive offerings, for instance. In many cultures, totem animals are important auxiliary or guardian spirits. Lucky charms in the shape of animals also protect people.

This suggests that, in many ways, we consider animals to be our equals. As humans, we even seek a special kind of connection with them, as shown by the “jaguar cult” in South America. We humans began domesticating animals many centuries ago; we look after them, and even decorate them. We surround ourselves with animals in the form of toys or everyday utensils – and we humanize them, cats in particular – as best exemplified by the online LOLcats phenomenon.

Animals are useful sources of food such as milk and honey, yet they are also hunted and killed. The exhibition spotlights the violent aspect of the relationship in the form of fish traps, terrestrial traps, spears or fish hooks. Animals must serve as trophies or provide substances that humans expect will improve their health or protect them. What is more, animals are eaten.

Saddles, tethers, or muzzles exemplify the human domination of animals. They are forced to work, were deployed in wartime – as shown in pictures – or have to entertain us, whether in the circus, at the rodeo or bullfight, or as fighting crickets or cocks. Clearly, to be an animal in human society has little to do with biology and everything to do with culture.

For Kids

Kids (and adults too!) can also spend time deciding what animal they would like to be, imitating animal noises, decorating cows, listening to stories, writing postcards of cats, and laughing at animals that know how to outsmart us.

The exhibition comes with an accompanying publication in German and English.

The exhibition “animalistic! No Culture Without Animals”, part of a cooperative project between four Basel museums, is on from 27 August 2021 to 20 November 2022. Details of the other three exhibitions and their later starting dates are attached, and are also to be found on the exhibition website: [tierischbasel.ch](https://www.tierischbasel.ch)

Images can be downloaded from: <https://www.mkb.ch/de/services/medien/cllp-o/medienbilder.html>