

## **BIG – Things Interpretations Dimensions**

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**Bigness remains a fascinating phenomenon, even in today's age of superlatives. The exhibition "BIG" presents literally huge things. It applies new standards and explores the fascinating cultural expressions and dimensions of size.**

Enter the room, put back your head and behold the museum's largest object on display: the famous Abelam ceremonial house. It opens the new permanent exhibition BIG – Things Interpretations Dimensions in a big way, so to speak. From time immemorial, humans have been fascinated by size. House posts and bis poles from Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, respectively, are not only visually impressive, they also evidence what "great" things people are capable of achieving together, despite limited technological means. Yet, together with other artefacts such as a huge grain basket from the Bernese Emmental, they also show how awkward big objects can become in terms of handling. The logistical problems continue up to this day – as a film documenting the transport of the objects from the storage rooms to the museum and the preparations for the exhibition goes to show.

Huge things exceed common standards of size. But big doesn't mean the same thing across the world. Ideas about bigness vary from culture to culture. For this purpose we show a Basel cubit next to a wooden board with a hole in it from Bali which was used to gauge the size of sacrificial chicken: if the animal got stuck in the hole, it was ready for sacrifice! Likewise, we humans are measured from the instant we enter the world to the moment we die. Throughout life, size and the "right" body proportions are a constant concern, often with dubious consequences, as today's beauty industry and racial anthropometry in the past go to show.

The exhibition is not just about physical size. Across fourteen exhibition spaces we gauge the cultural dimensions of bigness. Status and power are two examples in this respect. High rank is often betokened by correspondingly powerful and valuable objects, such as the elaborate ceremonial shield of a Naga warrior or the splendid jaguar belt of a South American chief. And when it comes to power, the divine is usually close at hand. In initiations, too, often stunning scenes involving enormous objects are enacted, invoking awe and wonder on the part of the young men undergoing the process.



Normally, big things evoke admiration, but occasionally they cast a long shadow and are viewed as terrifying. The exhibition brings to life Indian demon kings as well as giants from the mountains of Glarus. Big data is increasingly regarded as a threat; this takes us straight to our final exhibition space, which deals with the biggest of all forms of bigness: infinity.