

## The Path to the Beyond

**The new exhibition at the Museum der Kulturen Basel shows how different societies imagine the path leading from this world to the next and what is required for the journey.**

It all begins with death and a burial, and, accordingly, the design of the exhibition “The Path to the Beyond” follows the same trajectory. The atmosphere is sombre but not deadly serious, and, from time to time, there is even room for a few cheerful touches here and there. Curator Richard Kunz takes visitors on a fascinating trip to the world beyond. Every society, religion, and individual has their own idea of how to prepare for afterlife, which of the many paths is the right one, and what is required on the journey. The approximately 250 exhibits on display from MKB’s collections reflect this rich variety.

The journey actually begins before death: with the help of a range of objects people prepare for death and what follows. A figure of the Buddha or an image of Saint Joseph, the patron saint of a good death, ensure a peaceful passing. Then it is up to the bereaved to anoint the deceased with special oils, or daube the body with camwood paste, wrap it in precious cloths and place it on a bier or in a special coffin before sending it on its final journey.

Mind you, on the right path. Unlike in the exhibition, there are no signposts on the way; instead, the deceased are accompanied by birds or the sound of musical instruments. Masks, fans, and amulets provide the soul guidance while travelling in boats or palanquins, as shown in scroll paintings and textiles respectively.

In the Peruvian region of Huancayo, the dead are guided to the beyond in a fixed sequence of ritual acts. Artist Pedro Abilio Gonzales Flores brings the five stages of the cycle of death to life with the help of impressive scenes featuring a host of figures made of gypsum and wood. In Bali, the process of cleansing and liberating the soul is a vital step, but takes up to several months to complete. The paraphernalia required for this including a cremation tower, effigies, and an incineration coffin form the centrepiece of the exhibition.

### **Arrival and remembrance**

The Ngaju people of Borneo know two burial ceremonies. The first takes place shortly after death, while the secondary burial, an extensive mortuary feast held years later, lasts 33 days. Drawings and a sacrificial pole depict the journey to the afterlife. The Tibetan Book of the Dead, Bardo Thödol, describes the transformation process that lasts 49 days after death, in the course of which the deceased encounter benevolent as well as wrathful deities.

The journey has no finite destination, meaning that, in many places, the dead are here to stay in the shape of ancestors. Thus, the topic of remembrance features prominently in the final section of the exhibition. A large Iranian cloth depicts the Last Judgement. Ancestor figures accompany the bereaved to form part of Eddie Hara’s large mural titled “See you on the other side”. Stupa, lantern house, and Yahrzeit candles are items used to commemorate the dead. In China, descendants burn paper items that represent things that the deceased enjoyed in life, including designer bags, jewellery, money, cigarettes, electronics, and sweets.

On the Mexican Día de Muertos and the neopagan Samhain the dead are invited to come and visit the living. Altars play a central role on these occasions. Mexican artist Pepe Villegas has created a mortuary altar for the exhibition which, alongside a Wiccan altar, provide insight into these life-affirming festivities. However, it is only rarely that we come across figures that return from the beyond: Bhima from the Indian epic Mahabharata and Siberian shamans are two such cases.

The exhibition is on display from 6 September 2025 to 26 April 2026. Visit our [website](#) for images.