

Thirst for Knowledge Meets Collecting Mania

Since their foundation in the 19th century, the task of ethnographic museums has changed fundamentally. Today, the starting point is the principle of equality in which a wide range of interdependences, differing perspectives, and reflection modes are addressed. The present exhibition sheds light on some of the problematic areas of museum work which result from the institution's history, the conditions of collecting, and the forms of display.

Thirst for knowledge – Holding large collections from all regions of the world originally served the purpose of cultural demarcation and hierarchization. Over and over again, annual reports from the early years of the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) euphorically state that a new region has now been included on the museum's world map, or that an existing typology has been extended by the acquisition of a certain object. At first, the emphasis was on sheer quantity, but, later, the focus shifted more to qualitative aspects such as authenticity, precise provenance, contexts, and scientific enquiry.

Collecting mania – Since every object was potentially evidence of the evolution of mankind, just about everything was collected in those early days. For one thing, the museum wished to “own a collection of respectable size”, for the other, the motto was “collect as long ‘as we still have daylight’ because the custodians of our collections in the future will probably not have the opportunity to purchase such authentic objects at such reasonable prices”, as Leopold Rütymeyer, one of the senior staff members, put it in 1902. This policy soon led to a shortage of storage space. However: “Meanwhile, the scarcity of space should not prevent us from augmenting the collections to the best of our ability, as we are convinced that, in a matter of a few decades, the tragic process of colonization will have reached even the most distant lands and the abundance of stylish and artistic objects produced by these fascinating foreign peoples will have disappeared forever.”

Today, MKB is committed to a different collection policy: an object is acquired if it bears testimony to cultural encounters and is able to make a significant contribution to an exhibition.

Arriving at the museum – We are rarely in possession of a paper trail that seamlessly documents how an object reached the museum: sometimes we lack its exact provenance, in other cases there is no reference to the path it took between production and purchase, and, in addition, the original producers are scarcely ever named. What we almost invariably do know, however, is who gave a specific object to the museum, either through sale, as a gift, or in an exchange.

Sensitive objects/sensitive collections – Although Switzerland was never a colonial power, the country – and with it its museums – was undoubtedly part of the “colonial project”. What needs to be investigated are questions like: to what extent did MKB rely on colonial networks to grow its collections? Under what circumstances were objects purchased? Why were human remains included in the collection? What understanding of respect was applied when handling powerful and sacred objects, and who defined that understanding? Despite the sensitive nature of the task, museum work is still focused on collecting, categorizing, classifying, comparing, and ordering. But today it is more about modifying existing orders and creating new ones, not about preserving old ones. This can be achieved by adopting a new understanding of knowledge production and research.

1 Time Period – Collection Growth

Beginnings of the collection– Lists entered in annual reports give us an impression of the number and variety of objects that were added to the collections each year – here, for example, the year 1898:

2 “Worth mentioning are, for instance, the copper, brass, and silver works, particularly the large, richly ornamented dishes, plates, vases, cups, and jewellery pieces from Lucknow, Benares, Agra, Moradabad, Udayapur, Kashmir, Madras, etc., fine ivory carvings from Amritsar and Murshidabad, lacquer work from Benares and Kashmir, sandalwood carvings from Surat, soapstone works from Agra, alabaster sculptures from Djajapura, an inlaid marble plate, an old Rajput shield and dagger, and, finally, cloths from different parts of India.”

“From Java, we were gifted the following items: [...] a plough – the third in our collection – a valuable contribution which helps to explain the development of this important equipment from simple to complex, furthermore a hoe, an axe, a plane, as well as clay, copper, bronze, and bamboo vessels, along with bows and arrows, swords, daggers, etc.”

“A collection of roughly 80 Chinese objects, namely musical instruments, deity images, bronze censers, weapons, wood carvings, a compass, opium pipes, games, a pair of scales, glasses, jewellery pieces, fans, clothes, and shoes.”

Joint project– These musical instruments were produced in 2006 in the context of a cooperation project between MKB and the Brazilian organizations Yarikayu and Instituto Socioambiental. Yarikayu was founded by the remaining 350 Yudja. Like many other indigenous groups, the Yudja retreated further and further inland to evade the advancing colonizers in the 19th and 20th centuries, albeit at a tremendous demographic cost – by 1950 only 37 of the original 2,000 Yudja were left – and with a devastating loss of knowledge since many traditional skills and practices were no longer passed down.

For the purpose of regaining some of this lost knowledge, the Yudja undertook a research expedition to their former homeland to collect plants, which only grow there but which are of great mythical significance. The journey was funded by the sale of the musical instruments to the MKB. To the Yudja, the fact that their collection is being preserved at the MKB means a valorisation of their culture.

3 Flutes; Middle Xingu, Brazil; bamboo; IVc 25853-25860; purchased from Associação Yarikayu in 2006

4 Trumpets; Middle Xingu, Brazil; bamboo, gourd; IVc 25865-25872; purchased from Associação Yarikayu in 2006

5 Clarinets; Middle Xingu, Brazil; bamboo; IVc 25873-25877; purchased from Associação Yarikayu in 2006

6 Rattles; Middle Xingu, Brazil; bamboo, tortoise shell, cotton string, bee’s wax, stones, husks, glass beads, feathers, palm seed pods; IVc 25878-25884; purchased from Associação Yarikayu in 2006

“The purpose of ethnographic collections is to inform about the cultural history of mankind. They contain pieces of evidence that bespeak the level at which peoples poor in culture stand, as well as the path on which others have progressed to universal culture.”

Annual Report 1893

Comparing – Appraising

Collecting allows comparisons. Ethnographic museum collections are brimming with old weapons. From the mid-19th to mid-20th century they were considered a significant object category because they served as a useful basis of comparison. This plethora of weapons has a lot to do with European cultural history:

For the sake of peace – Disarming indigenous peoples also served the purpose of “pacifying” newly won colonial territories, while missionaries saw therein a major step on the savages’ path to “civilization”. Many of the seized weapons ended up in museum collections.

Categorizing the wild – Weapons were classified according to their physical features, with the assessment of form and technology based on Western criteria. How the weapons were made and for what purposes they were used, other than for battle and hunting, was often not acknowledged. This one-sided view underpinned the validity of Western cultural classification and provided material “evidence” of the “primitivity” of non-European peoples. Weapons were exhibited in large numbers for many decades. This is no longer the case today. This probably has also to do with the process of de-colonization – in step with it, world views and museum practices also changed. But, as yet, museums have not dealt critically with these “ethnographic armouries”.

Ascribing gender?

Well into the 1920s, the collectors were predominantly men, who had little access to the lifeworld of women, and whose views of gender were deeply embedded in the European tradition. Correspondingly, most of them tacitly ascribed the category of weapons to the world of men. Was this classification based on supposedly “typically female” and “typically male” attributes?

Bow and arrow are the most important hunting weapons among the Tuparí, with a distinction made between normal hunting arrows and arrows used in war and on special ceremonial occasions. The collector Franz Caspar noted: “Carrying weapons is an expression of manliness and prowess. Women neither carry nor use weapons. In this sense, this arrow, allegedly from a tribe of Amazons living north of the Tuparí, is quite striking (*aramira-eköp-tsiru-eköp* = “arrow of arrow-bearing women”).

- 7 Women’s arrow; Tuparí, Brazil; bamboo, palm wood, string, feather; IVc 9017; purchased from Franz Caspar in 1956

Paul and Fritz Sarasin – two Basel personalities who shaped the museum over many years – purchased two daggers of different size on the Indonesian island of Java in 1898. The smaller one was listed as a “woman’s dagger”. It is not known whether they were given this term upon purchase or whether it reflects their own classification, possibly upon the basis of size. The smaller dagger probably served as an amulet. In Indonesia, miniature weapons of this kind are quite common.

- 8 Dagger, *badik*; Sukabumi, Java, Indonesia; steel, horn, ebony, bone; IIc 6; gifted by Fritz and Paul Sarasin in 1898

Towards the end of the 1960s, the former museum director Alfred Bühler purchased a range of Tibetan objects in New Delhi, India: knives, coffers, as well as an item he described as a “woman’s belt”. Why this object was given a female ascription remains unclear. Tibet is often associated with spirituality and pacifism, but one tends to forget that, going back as early as the 7th century, weapons and military actions formed an important part of Tibetan culture.

Mounted Tibetan marksmen wore belts like this to which they attached their powder horn and bullets. When making swords, Tibetan smiths forged together hard “male iron” and soft “female iron” to create strong blades.

9 Woman’s belt; Tibet; fabric, leather, silver, steel, copper, brass, wood, horn, turquoise, carnelian, wax; IId 6732; gifted by Alfred Bühler in 1967

This information from 1908 concerning an Aboriginal digging stick is somewhat controversial: on the one hand, it is described as the “main weapon of the gentle sex”, on the other, as a “stick or club used for hitting or throwing” – usually by men. The digging stick refutes the image of “woman the gatherer” and “man the hunter”. Up to this day, women use digging sticks to hunt and kill smaller mammals and lizards; in other words, the digging stick serves as the main tool for procuring both animal and vegetable food, but in armed conflict women could easily convert it to an effective throwing weapon.

10 Digging/throwing stick; central Australia; wood; Va 82; brought to Frankfurt by the missionary Carl Strehlow, purchased from the Museum der Weltkulturen Frankfurt a. M. in 1908

Recognizing significance?

Arrows of all shapes and sizes were used across the globe and are represented in just about all ethnographic museum collections. The MKB holds more than 7,500 arrows.

During his research in Vanuatu (1910-1912), Felix Speiser recognized the significance of arrows for anthropological research. When comparing them, he noticed that no two arrows were identical and concluded therefrom that, in their function as items of everyday use, they provided an ideal starting point for research, not least because they were easy to procure and could be examined on the spot. Unlike artworks and ritual objects, arrows offered direct insight into everyday life. Material and shape provided indications as to their function, their design as to their symbolic meaning. Consequently, the analysis of their materiality and use was an apt means to provide information as to the variety and differences of cultures.

Arrows vary strongly in terms of materiality, function, and cultural meaning, and cannot be limited to the fields of warfare and hunting. The 289 arrows on display represent but a fraction of the 7,622 arrows held in the collection. They have not been the subject of research for many years, nor are there any plans in this direction.

11 289 arrows from all parts of the world, collected by and purchased from or donated by various people.

Ignoring interrelations?

Collectors usually classified weapons merely as killing tools and ignored all other forms of usage and meaning. This had a lot to do with concepts of societal and cultural hierarchy. At the lowest level, non-European cultures represented “stone-age primitivity”, at the other end of the scale you have “European civilization”. Cultural stereotypes travelled to Europe together with the collected objects, so to speak, and subsequently became consolidated – for example in exhibitions – owing to the lack of adequate cultural contextualization.

In 1887, the Basel collectors Carl and Johann Rudolf Geigy brought a “man catcher” home with them from Australia. They had purchased it from the curio dealers Tost & Ruho who, in turn, had obtained the item from a former “South Seas” captain. According to the information provided at the time, the noose was placed over the head of the victim and, by jerking the head backwards, the spike was driven into the neck. However, even contemporary reports from Papua New Guinea doubted that the device was ever used in the way described. From a technical point of view, too, “man catchers” seem unsuitable weapons as they are far too small, fragile, and unwieldy. Moreover, Europeans rarely got the chance to witness how weapons were actually used in battle. This raises the question as to whether the grisly and

technically refined “man catcher” was not merely a projection constructed by missionaries and colonial officers to censure the brutality of “wild” cannibals and head hunters. Ultimately, however, the manner of use described by the Geigy brothers cannot be ruled out altogether.

- 12 Man catcher; Gulf of Papua, Papua New Guinea; wood, rattan; Vb 99; gifted by Carl and Johann Rudolf Geigy in 1887

Among the Shipibo, initiation was a prerequisite of marriage for young girls. On the occasion, neighbouring groups were invited to two feasts at which the girls were circumcised and had their hair cut. At the same time, fights were waged, usually in the form of wrestling matches. However, sometimes clubs were used as well, although, unlike in real battle, only the flat side was applied to set the opponent off balance. The defeated combatant was then offered an alcoholic drink by the victor. It remains unclear whether they were pure show fights or whether they constituted a form of rule-guided conflict resolution.

- 13 Sword-shaped club, Shipibo, Ucayali River, Peru; wood; IVc 24532; purchased from Peter Koepke in 1992

Among the Algonquin and Iroquois, men acquired status and prestige through feats of prowess as warriors and hunters. They communicated their battle feats through a variety of media. Into the grip of their war clubs they carved their names, totems, and faces as well as the number of slain or captured enemies, and deposited them next to the dead enemy on the battlefield, a bit like a business card. In the course of the 19th century, clubs lost their significance as weapons but continued to be used in ceremonies and dances. This club is “empty”, meaning it probably belonged to warrior who had either not yet achieved success in battle or had engraved his insignia already into another club.

- 14 Spherical war club; borderlands Canada/USA; wood; IVa 62; gifted by the Basel Historical Museum in 1903, prior to that Collection Prof Jung

In a letter to Fritz Sarasin, Felix Speiser uttered his dismay: “The cultural conditions are similar to the ones in Gasmata [south coast of New Britain], representing Melanesian culture at its most primitive level; basically, they only have their shields, and poles which they have the impudence of calling spears. So, there is really little to collect: I obtained a few shields, the above-mentioned spears, and some items of clothing, but NO cultural artefacts, apart from the so-called Kamutmut masks.”

- 15 Pig spear; New Britain, Papua New Guinea; palm wood; Vb 8782; collected for MKB by Felix Speiser in 1930

- 16 Spear with ornamental band; Gasmata, New Britain, Papua New Guinea; wood, string; Vb 8804; collected for MKB by Felix Speiser in 1930

- 17 Undecorated spear; New Britain, Papua New Guinea; wood; Vb 8805; collected for MKB by Felix Speiser in 1930

European descriptions of I-Kiribati, that is, the inhabitants of the Gilbert Islands, were usually focused on warfare and their “warlike nature”, thus underpinning their reputation as “wild savages”. Some reports doubted that the I-Kiribati ever developed these suits of armour themselves and suspected some form of early European influence.

Battles between different groups in the Kiribati Islands were not rare, the cause usually being the shortage of land and resources. Duels were a common form of fighting. The aim was to only injure the opponent, since an unwanted death called for compensation on the part of the victorious party. Gerd Koch, a leading Oceania specialist, wrote: “The quarrelsome Gilbertese

engage in feuds at the slightest provocation, for example, an alleged insult, which then continue for generations in form of payback killings.”

- 18 Armour; Kiribati; coconut fibre, rattan; Vc 134; purchased from Captain Pöhl in 1897
19 Belt; Kiribati; ray skin, wood, coconut fibre; Vc 135; gifted by Carl and Johann Rudolf Geigy in 1887
20 Helmet; Kiribati; skin of porcupine fish; Vc 205; gifted by Karl R. Hoffmann, 1905
21 Trousers; Kiribati; coconut fibre; Vc 207; gifted by Karl R. Hoffmann in 1905

Becoming a warrior, *rorobuaka*, was an important step for boys on their path to manhood in the course of which they received their first weapon. Shark-tooth swords and daggers were used mainly in duels to settle conflicts and to preserve one's honour.

- 22 Sword; Kiribati; wood, shark teeth; Vc 217; purchased from Messrs Umlauff Hamburg in 1899
23 Knife; Kiribati; wood, shark teeth; Vc 753; exchange with Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde München in 1934

Transforming meanings?

Owing to the expansion of European trade in overseas territories, local weapons were increasingly replaced by Western arms. In return, indigenous weapons gained value as export goods. The enormous demand for “exotic” weapons entailed that the production and aesthetics of arms were accommodated to fit foreign tastes.

A kris is an asymmetrical dagger which was only rarely used for fighting and killing. The knife's true importance lies in its spiritual significance. Many kris are believed to have special powers. When the Dutch occupied Bali at the beginning of the 20th century, the knowledge of how to produce kris was just about lost. In 2000, a project supported by the MKB was launched in Bali with the aim of reviving this knowledge.

- 24 Stages in forging a kris blade; Bali, Indonesia; steel, nickel; Iic 21638.30, 21638.31; collected for MKB by Achim Weihrauch in 2000

Between 1931 and 1932, Alfred Bühler travelled to the Admiralty Islands where he assembled a comprehensive collection, including a series of “throwing spears”, or javelins. Bühler never questioned their quality as weapons although most of the obsidian spears look rather shaky and certainly not suitable for hunting or warfare. Early reports mention the use of obsidian spears in war, but in the course of the contact with Europeans they became mere trading goods. A large blade and rich decorations made them particularly attractive for collectors. In addition to spears, local producers also began making more handy daggers. The obsidian spears bear evidence to the type of interaction between European and Admiralty Islanders.

- 25 Obsidian spears; Admiralty Islands, Papua New Guinea; obsidian, wood, string, parinarium putty, tear grass seeds, pigments; Vb 9579, 9581, 9583, 9585, 9588, 9591, 9600, 9602, 9608, 9615, 9616, 9618, 9622, 9623, 9625, 9627, 9692, 10455; collected for MKB by Alfred Bühler in 1931/1932

Among the Tuparí, bearing arms – bow and arrow, sword-shaped clubs – was a mark of masculinity. Compared to early specimens, modern sword-shaped clubs are roughly 20cm longer, which is a possible indication that they now serve predominantly as ornamental weapons.

- 26 Sword-shaped clubs; Rondônia, Brazil; palm wood, palm leaf, cotton, feathers, bamboo (?), bark cloth (?); IVc 9022-9024; purchased from Franz Caspar in 1956

Conquering without resistance?

European colonial expansion was not achievable without the use or at least threat of force, and disarming indigenous populations was an effective way of preventing armed resistance

and securing colonial power. The seized weapons often passed over into the possession of colonial officers. The missions also played a role in this process as converts often handed in their weapons as a token of their new Christian faith. Many of these seized weapons ended up in museums.

Early European explorers and travellers brought back home knives like this where they often served to accentuate reports about gruesome executions. Consequently, the term “execution knife” became inscribed in everyday parlance although, by then, the items had often undergone a change and merely served as prestige and dance ornaments. Towards the end of the 19th century, these knives became coveted objects, at a time when the “pacification” of what today is the Democratic Republic of the Congo by Belgian colonial troops was moving ahead not only rapidly, but also brutally.

Before purchasing the objects, the curator asked a colleague for his opinion: “As far as I can tell from your descriptions and the pictures, we are dealing with superb pieces which have already become extremely rare owing to the Belgians’ barbaric exploitation of the Congo. I urgently advise you to purchase the collection without hesitation for you will probably never find anything like it again.” Following this advice, Fritz Sarasin successfully pushed for the purchase of Léon Woog’s collection, a Basel merchant who had led a trading expedition up the Lumako River.

27 Knives of rulers/dignitaries, work knife; Democratic Republic of the Congo; iron, wood, brass; III 794, 829, 834; purchased from Léon Woog in 1898

Scalping knife was the common term for knives of a certain shape, although they were probably actually never used for scalping. Scalping was a pre-colonial practice in various cultures in eastern North America and on the Great Plains. However, it only became widespread from the 17th century onwards, after European settlers had introduced iron knives and begun paying rewards for the killing of indigenous people. A scalp was regarded as a kind of proof.

Scalping knives were used by the Cheyenne of the North American Great Plains for the removal of an enemy’s scalp including the hair. Hair was regarded as the seat of a person’s soul and life force, and scalping an enemy meant that his life force passed over into the victorious warrior. The knife with a deer horn handle is in a richly decorated scabbard. The Venetian or Bohemian glass beads were acquired through barter. The metal sleeve holding the tufts of hair is reminiscent of the sporrans of Scottish immigrants.

The designation “scalping knife” made the objects more interesting as collector’s items. However, already in the Annual Report of 1909 the authenticity of this knife was doubted.

28 Scalping knife; Great Plains, USA; iron, brass, deer horn; IVa 116a; purchased from Etienne Loppé in 1909

29 Leather sheath; Great Plains, USA; leather, glass beads, horsehair, tinplate, porcupine bristles; IVa 116b, purchased from Etienne Loppé in 1909

The aim of the Boxer Movement was to drive out all “foreigners” such as trade representatives and missionaries from China. The rebellion involving repeated attacks on foreign people and institutions was put down bloodily by the Eight Nation Alliance – German Empire, France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Austria-Hungary, Russia and the USA – in 1900. According to the file card, the bow and sword were “seized from a Boxer warrior near Peking”. The MKB purchased the items from a certain Mr Naas of Buschweiler; however, it is not recorded how this gentleman came into possession of the objects.

30 Bow and sword in black scabbard; Beijing (?), China; wood, cloth, iron, leather; IId 365, 367; purchased from Mr Naas in 1901

The objects – a knife, a skull, and a leather cap – are from the Basel Mission Collection. The three items were treated as a single object and given the label “executioner’s cap”. The skull probably never belonged with the other two items. The European kitchen knife, however, is shown on photographs taken by the missionary and collector Fritz Ramseyer. The picture shows the alleged executioner wearing the cap and holding two knives, one of them the object in question. Ramseyer received the cap and the knife from a local ruler. Whether the knife was ever used for an execution remains an open question.

31 Knife, cap; Abetifi, Ghana; steel, plastic, leather, leopard skin; III 26271.01, 26271.03; attained by the Basel Mission from Fritz Ramseyer in 1914; gifted by Basel Mission in 2015

Toy rifles were popular during the two world wars. Simple, small rifles were a ready means to playfully accustom children to war. In Europe, the two wars deromanticized the image of war, with negative effects on the sale of toy weapons.

32 Toy rifle; Trøndelag, Norway; wood; VI 9190; purchased from Julius A. Konietzko in 1919

Discussing – Disregarding

According to what values do museums select objects for an exhibition? Putting certain items on display can prove problematic because they are otherwise restricted to a closely defined group. However, problems may also arise when doing research on certain objects, on the way they are stored, or because they were collected in the first place at all.

Secrecy – For one thing, this concerns items which were reserved for specific groups in their original culture. These objects may embody ancestors, contain creative powers, or be associated with special locations. Only certain people know their true meaning, others may not even know that they exist.

Potency – Often the potency of a specific object, said to be dangerous to anyone not initiated, is invoked as an argument against displaying it publicly. Museums are increasingly following the recommendations offered by indigenous groups.

Instrumentalization – Exhibiting objects is not a neutral act. Things can be instrumentalized for the wrong purposes. Certain objects held in museum collections may be politically highly sensitive.

In 2018, the Basel carnival clique Negro-Rhygass decided to do away with its traditional logo, which shows a black man with large lips wearing a grass skirt and adorned with a bone in his hair. The decision had been preceded by a lively public debate about racism in Basel.

33 Lighter; Basel, Switzerland; plastic, metal; VI 71895; gifted by Bernhard Gardi in 2009

When are representations of others discriminatory?

The Bamana in Mali have a complex system of associations and societies, some of which are secret, among them the large and widespread Komo society. Spectacular animal masks are one of their hallmarks. The masks are adorned with materials such as animal horns, bristles, and tusks believed to have magic qualities. Their potency is often enhanced by sacrificial blood. However, it is unclear whether the masks were ever used for ritual performances. In their indigenous context, Komo masks are taboo for the uninitiated.

34 Komo mask; Koulikoro region, Mali; wood, pig bristles, antelope horn, pigments; III 23781; gifted by Rudolf Geigy in 1985

Do location and context determine the right of access to an object?

Since 1977, representatives of the Zuni people have been demanding back ritually significant objects from museums, among them figures of tutelary deities, masks, and other sacred objects. In the meantime, roughly a hundred *ahayu:da* deity figures have been returned to the Zuni, after museums accepted the argument put forward by Zuni ambassadors that *ahayu:da* personify specific individuals and represent communal Zuni property. Removing them from shrines was qualified as theft from the start; it is time that they were returned to the Zuni for ritual usage and in order for the balance of power to be reinstated.

The situation with the *kokko* masks is different, and, so far, museums have not yet heeded the arguments put forward by the Zuni. *kokko* are benign spirit beings of varied appearance. For the duration of a ceremony, *kokko* maskers become the spirits they represent. The masks belong to the repertoire of individual religious societies and should be reserved for the Zuni alone. Non-initiated persons are prohibited from handling the masks in any way.

“It is strange enough that things are removed from their local setting and context, now they have been renamed and reframed in languages and contexts foreign to the place and people from which they were born.”

Jim Enote (director), Website of Zuni A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center, New Mexico, USA, 2015

35 Mask; New Mexico, USA; leather, cotton, pigments; IVa 2368; purchased from Hans Coray in 1970
36 *ahayu:da* figure; New Mexico, USA; wood; exchange with Gallery Lemaire Amsterdam in 1968

Do objects lose their potency if they are exhibited?

This kind of cabinet was used for storing sacrificial cakes which were made of butter and grain. In Tibetan monasteries these cabinets are kept in separate rooms: the angry-looking and intimidating images on the cabinet's inside and outside walls drastically tell of the transience of existence and are reserved for the eyes of the initiated. Whether or not this cabinet had ever been consecrated or whether a Buddhist lama once retracted the consecration is not known. After the first major wave of refugees from Tibet at the end of the 1950s, many transportable, religious objects from monasteries and private households were auctioned off.

37 Cabinet; Tibet; wood, pigments; IId 14312; purchased from Gerd-Wolfgang Essen in 1998

What effect do representations have on outsiders?

tjurunga rank as the most powerful objects in central Australia. They stand for the mythological and kin-based relationship between the Arrernte, or Aranda, people and their natural environment. *Tjurunga* are secret-sacred objects which are kept in caves and only brought forth for certain ceremonies. Many *tjurunga* were traded to museums across the world via the mission station in Hermannsburg, including to the MKB. Owing to their secret-sacred status many museums agreed already a while ago to no longer exhibit such objects. In recent years, claims to have the *tjurunga* returned to their home communities have increased markedly. The existence of the Basel *tjurunga* is known to the concerned community and we are in contact with their representatives.

38 *tjurunga*; Central Desert, Australia; stone, pigments; Va 49-53; brought to Frankfurt by the missionary Carl Strehlow, purchased from the Museum der Weltkulturen Frankfurt a.M. in 1908

What happens to objects when they no longer (can) go on show?

Salvaging – Pillaging

Dealing with human remains has always been a sensitive issue because respect for death and the deceased, and beliefs concerning afterlife have usually prohibited their usage and display. Ethnographic museums classify human skulls and bones as well as grave goods as objects, and, like all other items, they were displayed regularly in exhibitions in the past. It is only recently that museums have given the issue a serious rethink.

Human remains – Through more frequent contact with indigenous populations, the interest in the bodies of “others” also grew and, with it, the wish to examine them anatomically. The overall objective was to classify the diversity of the human race. For this, scientists needed as much evidence as possible, so they began relying on travellers, missionaries, traders and anthropologists to procure the basic materials. It was only in the process of decolonization that this practice came under increased criticism, but it was decades before the first claims of restitution reached the museums, and even longer before the first human remains were actually repatriated.

Grave goods – In ethnographic museums there is broad agreement as to how human remains should be handled, but as far as grave goods are concerned there is (yet) no consensus.

Excavating graves?

The thirst for knowledge induced scholars to conduct research on the dead and on funerary practices, in the course of which graves were opened and bodies, body parts, and funerary goods taken out. There is, however, a significant difference between the diligent method of archaeological excavation and the unprofessional removal of human remains from graves and selling them off through illegal trade. Anthropological collections and work on them lie somewhere in between.

In 1972, the MKB acquired 135 Mexican ceramics from a private collector. An additional 59 pieces were stored in the museum as deposits. Towards the end of the 1980s, the MKB came to an agreement with the collector as regards a definitive takeover: “At the beginning of the year, the museum was presented with the opportunity of obtaining a series of ancient Mexican clay figures and vessels which were part of a collection assembled decades ago. The new acquisitions are a welcome addition to the pre-Colombian collection which has been in the museum’s possession since the 19th century.”

In the meantime, the MKB has changed its acquisition policy. In the old days, collectors were not asked to provide written proof of the provenance of the items they were offering, nowadays a complete paper trail is prerequisite for any acquisition.

In Latin America, the art market tends to be swamped with pieces from illegal excavations. In Mexico, all pre-Hispanic artefacts are classified as national cultural heritage. The export of archaeological cultural property was first sanctioned in Mexico in 1825, later it was forbidden altogether. However, up to the early 1970s there were no clear international guidelines as to how to deal with contraventions, and even in the country itself the management of cultural property is still not free of conflict. Local communities have often demanded that archaeological finds should remain on site and not be conferred to state museums, not least because they rank as *indigenous* cultural property.

39 Figures, vessel, and fragments; central and southern Mexico; clay, pigments; AmDepFalquier 4, 14, 16, 19, 22, 23, 54, 58; deposited by René M. Falquier in 1972

40 Figures and vessels from shaft tombs; western Mexico; 550 BC – AD 900; clay, pigments; AmDepFalquier 1, 2, 5-9, 11-13, 15, 20, 21, 24-44, 46-53, 55-57, 59; deposited by René M. Falquier in 1972

41 Figures and fragments; Gulf coast, Mexico; 150 BC – ADF 900; clay, pigments; AmDepFalquier 3, 10, 17, 18, 45; deposited by René M. Falquier in 1972

The ethnographic collection compiled by Felix Speiser in Vanuatu between 1910 and 1912 includes a human femur which he described as an eating spatula. In addition to wooden knives and stone mortars, such bone spatulas made up part of Vanuatu's traditional eating equipment. Whether Speiser collected the femur to document the indigenous cutlery or as a curiosity is not known.

42 Eating spatula; Malakula, Vanuatu; bone; Vb 3559; gifted by Felix Speiser in 1912

The Basel art collector Rudolf Stähelin donated these three tomb ceramics from the Han period (206 BC – AD 220) to the museum in 1927. There is no information as to their provenance but the Han period is famous for its large repertory of jade, bronze, and clay tomb figures. The figures reflect the socio-economic status of the tomb occupant, featuring women, servants, pets, houses, and other possessions in form ceramic miniatures. Without sufficient documentation it is difficult to contextualize the objects.

43 Tomb ceramics; China; clay; IId 1438a, 1438b, 1441; gifted by Rudolf Staechelin in 1927

In Europe, woven cloths featuring embroidered patterns from Late Antique Egypt were regarded as testimonies of early Oriental textile art. Towards the end of the 19th century, they were extremely popular among private collectors and museums under the term “Coptic textiles”, in fact, they were so popular that people began opening the tombs and unwrapping the mummified bodies in order to meet the rising demand. Some of the cloths were even divided into separate pieces in order to supply even more customers.

In 1895, the Swiss archaeologist, dealer, and collector of these fragments, Robert Forrer, described the devastation of the burial mound of El-Achmim: “In front of us lies a low range of hills, devoid of vegetation, but even in the absence of a single blade of grass – in other words, bleak and naked – the view raises the heartbeat of any archaeologist. As far as the eye reaches, one recognizes that the mountain side is riddled with black holes where tombs have been opened; on approaching closer, one perceives further black dots which turn out to be dead human bodies – mummies bereft of their cloths and bindings, strewn across the ground and left to slowly rot away. The scorching sun burns down on what is left of their skin, blackened by age and mummification, revealing bones protruding from their cracked skin, brown at first but which then become bleached by the sun and take on the white hue of ivory. This is what is left of those who were once so reverently buried – here a complete body with its hair and skin intact, there a headless corpse, its chest burst asunder with white ribs sticking out. However, the picture I paint becomes even more gruesome as we approach the top of the mound. Open graves everywhere, the ground desecrated for miles around: here a bleached skull in the scorching sunlight, there a leg ripped off, and countless corpses lying next to pillaged graves. And where they have been returned to their graves – not laid but thrown in – one finds dead bodies standing upright with their heads peeping from the grave, or, the other way, with their feet stretching towards the heavens. Truly not a sight for tender hearts, instead a battlefield scene of the more wretched kind. Alas, this is not the time to reflect on the excesses of modern barbarism: archaeological interest takes precedence!”

44 Fabric fragments; Achmim, Egypt; 3rd to 7th c.; linen, wool, pigments; III 1945, 1950, 1963-1968, 1970, 1971; collected by Robert Forrer, gifted by Rudolf Hotz in 1904

“The president [Fritz Sarasin] informed about the following purchases which have been approved (seller: Messrs Umlauff in Hamburg): a) a wooden log with wedged-in or in-grown human bones resulting from a cannibal feast in the Fiji Islands (price: 60 marks).” Messrs Umlauff, a German trading company with worldwide operations, also supplied museums with “ethnographica”. Information concerning items such as this log could hardly be verified by a museum.

45 Wood log; Fiji; wood, bones; Vc 218; purchased from Messrs Umlauff in 1899

On 5 April 2012, the Basel Museum of Natural History received a package from an anonymous sender which it sent on immediately to the MKB after opening it. Inside was an Andean sacrificial stone vessel wrapped in kitchen paper. With it was a card on which was written by hand: “From Cuzco, Peru. Inka tomb (anonymous gift).” The object was catalogued despite missing information as regards provenance, for the purpose of documenting how museums occasionally came into possession of objects. Vessels of this type in the shape of lamas are common in the Andean region up to this day; the depression on the animal’s back was intended for sacrificial oil and fat. Ascription to the pre-Hispanic Inka culture has yet to be confirmed.

46 Sacrificial vessel with cardboard package; Peru; stone, paper, ink; IVc 26482; anonymous gift, 2012

In 1900 war broke out between the Asante kingdom and the British colonial power over the famous Golden Stool in the hinterland of Ghana. In his role as “unarmed field chaplain”, the missionary Otto Läderach gathered “Christian negroes” to form a “Christian battalion” in support of the British governor in his struggle against the Asante. This shin bone was among the remains of seventy war casualties who had been discarded in the hollow trunk of a felled kapok tree. Why Läderach decided to keep the bone we shall never know.

47 Human tibia; Asante, Ghana; bone; III 3863; purchased from the missionary Otto Läderach in 1911

The following objects and human remains became the subject of official proceedings in the 1930s. Theo Meier and Lukas Staehelin, two collectors from Basel who were travelling the world, collected them in the Marquesas Islands in Polynesia with the intention of sending them to the MKB. The French colonial authorities accused them of desecrating graves and seized the crates containing the objects in Papeete, the capital of Tahiti. Only after the MKB officially intervened in Paris was the shipment released. It is undisputed that the objects and bones were taken from graves but the exact circumstances of acquisition would need to be investigated in Tahiti and on site in the Marquesas.

48 Ear plug; Marquesas, French Polynesia; whale tooth (?); Vc 620-623; purchased from Theo Meier and Lucas Staehelin in 1933

49 Ornament; Marquesas, French Polynesia; whale tooth (?); Vc 624-625; purchased from Theo Meier and Lucas Staehelin in 1933

50 Ornament; Marquesas, French Polynesia; bone; Vc 628-630; purchased from Theo Meier and Lucas Staehelin in 1933

51 Spatulas; Marquesas, French Polynesia; bone; Vc 626-627; purchased from Theo Meier and Lucas Staehelin in 1933

52 Cord; Hiva Oa, Marquesas, French Polynesia; coconut fibre; Vc 1419; purchased from Theo Meier and Lucas Staehelin in 1933

53 Femurs; Hiva Oa, Marquesas, French Polynesia; bone; Vc 1420-1423; purchased from Theo Meier and Lucas Staehelin in 1933

54 Tooth; Marquesas, French Polynesia; tooth of a sperm whale; Vc 1425; purchased from Theo Meier and Lucas Staehelin in 1933

In 1949, Alfred Bühler travelled to the Indonesian islands of Sumba and Bali with the aim of collecting as many items as possible for the MKB. He returned to Basel with more than six thousand objects, among them this headstone and burial figures. Later, Bühler wrote in an article that the Japanese had opened graves in Sumba during their occupation of the island in the Second World War, and then left them to decay. Whether this was the reason why Bühler felt he had the right to collect items from graves remains unknown.

55 Headstone; Sumba, Indonesia; stone, glass beads; IIC 12669; collected for MKB by Alfred Bühler in 1949

On 17 October 1949, Alfred Bühler wrote in his diary: “One evening, schoolboys brought me two stone heads from a grave and, the next day, fragments of the corresponding bodies. I felt that not all was right here, but did not have the slightest reason to suspect evil play. [...] The next morning, after I had already packed the stone figures all except two pieces, I received a visit by a few elders who claimed that the figures had been stolen and that they wanted them back. [...] The negotiations went on for two days. In the end they agreed to allow me to keep the figures against an additional payment of a piece of cloth, 200 fl. (in those days ca CHF 325), and a kilogram of tobacco, claiming that these gifts were necessary to wash away the sin, to appease the Marapu (supernatural beings), and have new figures made.”

In the 1980s, a museum employee travelled to Sumba to clarify the circumstances of the acquisition and the question of ownership. The museum was willing to return the figures to their owners. However, the descendants declined and preferred to have new figures made on the basis of the photographs the man had brought with him.

56 Male and female funerary figures; Sumba, Indonesia; marlstone, glass beads; IIC 12671, 12672; collected for MKB by Alfred Bühler in 1949

The Lukas Vischer Collection was the first non-European collection to be shown in the new museum at Augustinergasse which opened in 1849. There are no known records in which Vischer describes how he acquired the collection. The collection was assembled shortly after Mexico had declared independence. In Mexico it is today regarded as a legally exported collection. It is even quite likely that the country’s first National Museum willingly ceded objects to European travellers in the 1820s and 1830s. At that time, huge amounts of pre-Hispanic objects were being excavated from old Aztec temples, houses, and tomb complexes during the major building works that were going on in Mexico City. At the same time, the young nation was in the process of reinventing its history and reevaluating its pre-Hispanic legacy in the search for a new identity and the attempt to break away from Spain, the old colonial power.

57 Musical and signal whistles, flutes; central Mexico; 1350-1521; clay, pigment, stucco; IVb 63, 70, 84, 87, 562, 563, 566; gift from the bequest of Lukas Vischer, 1844

The inhabitants of the Tiwi Islands in northern Australia erect carved and painted burial posts called *tutini* around the graves of their deceased. According to Tiwi belief, a deceased person’s spirit leaves the body through its chest and becomes a nebulous, humanlike apparition which is only visible in moonlight. This being remains in the vicinity of its old home and tends to pay the descendants unexpected and not necessarily welcome visits. The erection of the burial poles marks the end of the extended funeral process and the return of the life force to the spirit of the deceased. The *tutini* are seen as a gift to the deceased’s spirit. Over time, the burial posts wither away. Collecting and storing the poles interferes with this cycle.

58 Burial posts; Tiwi, Australia; wood, pigments; Va 1032, 1033; purchased from Karel Kupka in 1957

Basel geologists began collecting for the city's museums in the 1920s. For the MKB, they assembled collections above all in Latin America and South East Asia where many of them were working for oil companies. Twenty per cent of all new acquisitions between 1922 and 1955 came from geologists. Apart from ethnographic objects, the museum was particularly interested in archaeological finds: "They are gifts from Basel geologists working in South America; owing to the nature of their work they often get the opportunity to travel to quite pristine territories. [...] These collections are of special value to us not least because South American archaeology has lately attracted the attention of the Americanists, which means archaeological finds are increasingly gaining in scientific significance."

Felix Speiser informed the geologist Alfred Paul Werenfels in 1925 as follows: "To briefly inform you about what is of value to us, allow me to say the following: Everything. [...] What we especially appreciate are burial finds, if possible the entire contents of a grave, including the skeleton, and anything else you can excavate. In the area you are working in, our primary scientific interest concerns finds from ancient cultures: Chibcha, and here everything is of importance, even simple shards as well as pieces of stone and clay."

In 1955, the geologist Wilhelm Adolf Mohler donated to the museum a collection of archaeological finds from Venezuela where he lived from 1951 to 1962. He indicated the wider geographical context of the excavation sites, thus making at least a regional classification possible.

59 Archaeological finds; Falcon and Zulia, Venezuela; bone, stone, clay; IV 7987-8263; gifted by Wilhelm Adolf Mohler in 1955

Worshipping ancestors?

People have different ways of dealing with death. In some cultures, the deceased or at least certain parts of the body are kept among the living in the belief that they exert a positive influence. One example are Christian relics. But, of course, ancestors also play a key role in many other religions, beyond the major world faiths.

Certain items used for special rituals in Tibetan Buddhism are made from human bones and skulls up to this day. It is regarded as a special honour. The core concept of transience, the true subject of religious practice, is manifested in this material. These ritual objects are only handled by monks and nuns who have gone through the necessary initiation process.

60 *kapala*; Tibet; bone; IId 14341; purchased from Gerd-Wolfgang Essen in 1998

61 *kapala*; Tibet; bone, copper, turquoise, brass; IId 14342; purchased from Gerd-Wolfgang Essen in 1998

62 *kapala*; Tibet; bone, hair; IId 14343; purchased from Gerd-Wolfgang Essen in 1998

63 Bone skirt; Tibet; bone, cotton thread; IId 14344; purchased from Gerd-Wolfgang Essen in 1998

64 Hourglass drum; Tibet; bone, wood, goat skin, silk, semi-precious stone; IId 14346; purchased from Gerd-Wolfgang Essen in 1998

65 Bone trumpet; Tibet; bone, copper; IId 14348; purchased from Gerd-Wolfgang Essen in 1998

In Papua New Guinea, bones provided a key link to the ancestors, given that death was not regarded as an end to the relationship between the deceased and the living. The people believed that the spirit of a deceased person was saved in his or her bones. By treating the bones with care and affection, the descendants hoped that the ancestral spirit would support them such matters as hunting, fishing, love, and trade. Specially prepared and painted bones also served ritual purposes.

66 Ancestral bone; Sepik, Papua New Guinea; bone; Vb 24446; purchased from Gisela and Meinhard Schuster in 1962

67 Femur; Yupno River, Papua New Guinea; bone, vegetable material, earth pigments; Vb 29836; purchased from Verena Keck in 1988

On the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, life is closely interwoven with the existence of ancestors represented in figures, skulls, and masks. Ancestral figures, which were kept in the men's houses, were venerated in special ceremonies. This figure came to the MKB through the Basel collector Elsa Eckert in 1984. Its previous stations are not known.

68 Ancestral figure; Middle Sepik, Papua New Guinea; bone, hair, clay, vegetable fibres, pigments, cowrie shells; Vb 29389a, 29389b; purchased from Elsa Eckert in 1984

In the Solomon Islands, human remains were kept and looked after in special skull houses, or ossuaries. The skull was detached from the body after decomposition and taken to the skull house. The spirit of the deceased was supplied with ornaments, weapons, and foodstuffs. These ossuaries had a tremendous emotional and spiritual value for the descendants. As evidence of the ancestor worship in the Solomons, the MKB desperately wanted a skull house for its collection. Eugen Paravicini went to great lengths to obtain such a piece: "We packed the ossuary in a sack. [...] With great effort, we carried the little house down the mountain side; it was very heavy but our joy of having obtained such a valuable item was even greater, alas, not for long. The next day, a group of natives arrived and demanded back the skull. Ultimately I had to give in and handed them the ossuary." In the end, Paravicini succeeded in obtaining an ossuary from a different source.

"The natives, full of suspicion and armed with clubs, followed us everywhere; they were afraid we might rob a skull or even an entire skull house."

Eugen Paravicini, *Reisen in den britischen Salomonen*, 1931

69 Skull house; Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands; wood, bone; Vb 6938; collected for MKB by Eugen Paravicini in 1929

The Catholic cult of relics climaxed in the Baroque period with the veneration of the so-called catacomb saints. Anonymous skeletons were exhumed from the catacombs in Rome and professed to be the bodily remains of early Christian martyrs. The skeletons were transferred to monasteries where they were arranged, decorated, and given names, before being displayed and venerated as saints in churches. This also goes for the catacomb saint Ignatius. He was taken to the parish church of Küssnacht am Rigi somewhere around 1760 and joined the MKB collection in 1967.

70 Catacomb saint Ignatius; Küssnacht am Rigi, Switzerland; ca 1760; bone, wire, textile, silk brocade, cotton jersey, metal threads, beads, glass beads, plaster, leather, pins, wood; VI 35104; purchased from a person by the name of Lindroos in 1967

Among the Asmat, ancestral skulls act as "personal bodyguards" in everyday life. Men wear them as adornment on a chain on their backs and use them at night as neck rests. The skulls were detached from the body after decomposition, cleaned, and decorated with fruit seeds, feathers, and bamboo. According to the Asmat, skulls contain an ancestor's personal life force which passes over to the descendants. Transferring a skull to a collection severs the link between the living and the ancestors in the beyond.

71 Ancestral skull; Aorket, Papua, Indonesia; bone, seeds, feathers, resin, bamboo; Vb 22348; purchased from Wim van der Waal in 1967

In Hallstatt, Austria, the skulls of deceased relatives are exhumed and painted to this day. They are marked with the deceased's name and life data and conferred to the local ossuary. In 1972, a museum employee inquired about obtaining such a skull for the museum's European

Department. However, the responsible Hallstatt skull painter replied, "... unable to provide a skull from any old grave, only if relatives apply to the local church authority can a skull be painted and assigned to the ossuary, but you might consider using a skull of your own and sending it to me." In the following, the Museum of Natural History acquired two anonymous skulls and sent them to Hallstatt where they were painted, with the artist adding the initials of the two responsible staff members – R. W. and TH. G.

72 Skulls; unknown origin; bone, pigments, thread, lead; painted in Hallstatt, Austria; VI 42322, 42323; gifted by the Basel Museum of Natural History in 1973

The Iatmul of the Middle Sepik decorated the skulls of their deceased with the aid of a special putty. The first step involved reshaping the deceased's features with the support of his family to get the characteristic traits right. The painted, brown arched lines on the white grounding served as a reminder of the patterns the man had traditionally worn during rituals. The prepared skull was then carefully stowed away and brought out on ritual occasions to commemorate the deceased person.

73 Prepared human skull; Middle Sepik, Papua New Guinea; bone, laterite, rattan, pigments, mother-of-pearl, hair; Vb 6583; purchased from Patty Frank in 1926

Restituting skulls?

Restitution – the transfer of objects back to their community of origin – usually involves lengthy and complex procedures. An object's provenance, that is, its place of origin, first needs to be convincingly established. When objects are reclaimed, differing concepts regarding ownership, right, morals, and ethics tend to clash, but the principal aim is always to find a solution through dialogue. Restitution claims often trigger conflicting reactions in museums: the fear of the loss of knowledge runs up against the awareness concerning the potentially questionable conditions of acquisition. Restitution claims are generally accepted when human remains are involved. Moreover, returning objects to their rightful owners may even mark the beginning of a new, fruitful relationship between a museum and a source community.

In 1934, the MKB purchased from the Australian missionary Thomas Theodor Webb a painted skull with the help of the Basel zoologist Eduard Handschin who had established the necessary contact in Darwin. Little was known about the "skull of Jabo girl" at the time. Only recently the MKB received the opportunity to conduct research on site in East Arnhem Land as to the origins of the skull in collaboration with an Australian research project. On the basis of the skull's decorations, one was able to assign it to a specific clan. The members of the clan now know about the skull's whereabouts and are contemplating their next steps. The MKB is open to all suggestions.

74 Painted skull; East Arnhem Land, Australia; bone, pigments; Va 583; purchased from Thomas Theodor Webb in 1932

In 2016, the restitution of a preserved Maori head to New Zealand-Aotearoa was finalized with an official letter from the MKB. The *toi moko*, or *moko mokai*, had been held by the Te Papa Tongarewa Museum in Wellington as a permanent loan since 1992. It had come to the MKB as a gift in 1923.

Before the head was sent to New Zealand as a loan, members of the MKB technical staff in the 1980s produced three casts of the head at different stages.

"At last I am in the position to inform you that the Committee has decided to purchase the Maori head at the price of frs 1200.- as specified by you [...], in the expectation that we shall

be receiving the somewhat lighter head with the thick crop of hair, although, as far as I remember, its tattoos are not all that accomplished. In other words, not the dark one with the albeit better tattoos, and not the one that is slightly blemished. Payment will follow as soon as we receive the head.”

Letter of MKB to Hermann Meyer, 15 December 1922

75 Casts of a tattooed head; Basel, Switzerland; 1980; plastic, polyurethane; Vc 143.02-143.04

The three casts of a *toi moko* were removed from display owing to differing attitudes with respect to dealing with human remains. Post-mortem depictions – either in the form of human remains, as replicas, or as photographs – are alien to Maori cultural practice since they are believed violate the dignity of the deceased person. We duly respect this attitude.

Examining the dead?

On the one hand, human remains are a valuable resource as far as knowledge acquisition is concerned, on the other, conducting research on them raises a number of ethical issues. Human skulls and bones can tell us about cultural practices such as the preservation of skulls for ritual purposes or artificial head deformation which lends a person a very special appearance.

According to Felix Speiser, this skull with an overmodelled nose represents the “first stage in the preparation of a skull”. During his stay in Vanuatu (1910-1912), Speiser investigated the different methods of skull preservation. In order to make the exhumed skulls look more lifelike, they were overmodelled and painted, with the type of decoration indicating the former status of the deceased person. The forebears were depicted as authentically as possible. This specimen illustrates Speiser’s scientific interest in skull preservation.

76 First stage in the preservation of a skull; Ambrym, Vanuatu; bone, rattan; Vb 246; gifted by Felix Speiser in 1912

According to the filing cards of 1924, these wrappings contain the skeletons of two women wearing traditional dress. A member of the museum staff wrote on a note at the time, “The story is a bit of a mystery”, apparently because the cloth pieces that served as clothing were in such good shape. The fact that two skeletal hands – one from each woman – are held in the collection of the Basel Natural History Museum (NMB) adds to the mystery. What lies behind it remains unsolved, although the NMB and the Institute of Forensics are presently working jointly on the case.

77 Skeletons; Yos Sudarso Bay, Papua, Indonesia; bone, fabric; Vb 6491, 6492; gifted by Paul Wirz in 1924

These four skulls are all elongated at the back. In some parts of Vanuatu, people with such artificially deformed skulls were considered particularly desirable, beautiful, and intelligent. In order to obtain this shape, the heads of newborn babies were tightly bound with fabrics for the first few months.

Dr Henry Anson, a physician working on a plantation in Fiji, made the following observation: “That the people, having compressed skulls, do not appear to suffer in intellect from the practice, but there is no doubt, that their health is seriously prejudiced thereby, when suffering from the fevers, which are common to such people; the mortality being greater amongst them, than amongst round-headed fellow-country-men, those with compressed skulls being subject to severe delirium on slight provocation.”

78 Artificially deformed skulls; Malakula, Vanuatu; bone; Vb 4174, Vb 4692-94; gifted by Felix Speiser in 1912

Occasionally headhunters became victims themselves. Eugen Paravicini describes the following episode: “Actually, not only headhunting raids were used for obtaining heads, every opportunity was exploited for the purpose. A few years ago, six Malaita men, who had run away from their plantation, were attacked and killed near Pejuku. Whilst consuming their

bodies, the wife of one of the attackers demanded from her husband a piece of meat. When he refused – women are not allowed to eat human flesh – she killed him with an axe. Since then, the woman has become a Christian; she went to fetch her husband’s skull and sold it to me for a shilling.”

79 Skull; New Georgia, Solomon Islands; bone; Vb 12589; donation from the bequest of Eugen Paravicini, 1951

In the Solomon Islands, the anthropologist Hugo Bernatzik stumbled across a stone sarcophagus made of soft limestone. Inside he found the burnt remains of human bones. Bernatzik’s efforts to purchase the sarcophagus proved difficult as it was not to be removed from its island. However, since quite a few such stone sarcophagi had already been destroyed by missionaries, Bernatzik and the people of Choiseul finally agreed that the stone coffin would be installed in a museum: “There it [the sarcophagus] will be displayed in a nice house, and the people of my tribe will pass it reverently and honour the spirits of your ancestors.”

80 Stone sarcophagus; Choiseul, Solomon Islands; limestone, bones; Vb 11800; purchased from Hugo Bernatzik in 1933

This human skull from the Marquesas shows signs of trepanation, an operating method used for opening the skullcap. The skull was initially seized by the French authorities in Papeete in the early 1930s, after the collectors Theo Meier and Lucas Staehelin were accused of grave desecration. After the MKB intervened, with success, the skull found its way to Switzerland. Later, Theo Meier handed it over to the Burgdorf Museum as a “security”. In an exchange it then came to the MKB. A few years ago, it was transferred to the Basel Museum of Natural History for research purposes.

A short report provides a summary of the process: “In 1969, Lucas Staehelin gifted to the museum a range of objects he had found in a burial cave, including a trepanned skull. The skull was deposited in the museum for a while but then returned to Theo Meier and Lucas Staehelin in 1934. Mr Staehelin explains what happened then: ‘Theo Meier had promised the director of the ethnographic museum in Burgdorf a picture for which he received an advance payment. As the picture was never delivered or did not meet expectations, the skull remained in Burgdorf.’ In 1969 L. Staehelin inquired whether there was any possibility of redeeming the skull from Burgdorf so that the grave goods could be reunited in Basel.”

81 Skull; Marquesas, French Polynesia; bone; Vc 1407; exchange with the Ethnographic Museum Burgdorf in 1971

Collecting trophies?

Cultural practices such as headhunting and the production of headhunting trophies exerted a particular fascination on Europeans. In many cultures it was common to preserve the heads of slain enemies and display them accordingly. Western museums developed their own way of handling such trophies: practically no museum refrained from collecting skulls and putting them on display.

The Dayak headhunting trophies from Borneo were purchased in 1994 chiefly with the “effective enhancement” of the Indonesian collection in mind. A collector from Cologne had offered the curator of the South East Asia Department the chance of obtaining a range of

“top-quality ethnographica”. The Dayak had given up headhunting many decades ago but, according to the museum in 1994, the practice still served as an indispensable evidence of Dayak culture.

The people at the museum were aware of the highly sensitive nature of the acquisition: “Since all objects come from a Dutch private collection assembled more than seventy years ago and not straight from Indonesia, and since the skulls represent anonymous trophies and not personalized ancestral relics, the issue of restitution is basically off the table.”

82 Headhunting trophy; Borneo, Indonesia; human skull; IIC 21421-23; purchased from August Flick in 1994

This skull was adorned with shell bracelets, shell discs, and porcelain beads. They indicate the person’s former high rank and status. The skull was kept in the men’s house in order for the spirit of the deceased leader to pass on his knowledge to the assembled men and support them in decision making. The skull is a highly sought-after show piece in Europe; this not only has to do with its previous significance but also with its spectacular appearance.

83 Skull of a chief; New Georgia, Solomon Islands; human skull, shells (*Tricadna/Conus*), glass and porcelain beads; Vb 1686; purchased from William Ockelford Oldman in 1911

The MKB purchased this scalp from Patty Frank, the manager of the Karl May Museum in Radebeul, in 1933. In the first half of the 20th century, Frank owned the largest scalp collection in the German-speaking part of Europe. According to the correspondence with him, the scalp was from a Sioux warrior but it appears that Frank was either unable or unwilling to provide any more details as regards the piece’s exact provenance. In the annual report of 1933, the scalp was described as not really appealing; the only reason for the purchase was that it was doubtful whether the one the museum already owned was actually genuine.

84 Scalp, Sioux (Dakota?), USA; hair, scalp, leather, glass beads, feather; IVa 470; purchased from Patty Frank in 1933

For many years, the Marind-anim had the reputation of fierce headhunters. In the belief that the head was the seat of a person’s lifeforce, they made special trophies out of their victims’ heads. The heads were preserved in a special way: for suspending them from the ridge of the men’s house roof, a thin strip of rattan was drawn through the nose. When the Dutch authorities banned headhunting, the trophies were seized and sold off to museums. The Basel anthropologist Paul Wirz also collected headhunting trophies: “I was handed the skulls without much ado, but never the respective jawbones. As these were quite small it was easier to hide and keep them than an entire skull; based on the principle *pars pro toto*, they performed the same function as spiritual mediums.”

85 Headhunting trophy; Papua, Indonesia; bone, rattan, hair, wool, wickerwork; Vb 4879; purchased from Paul Wirz in 1919

86 Headhunting trophy; Papua, Indonesia; bone, skin, pigments, wood, rattan; Vb 4880; purchased from Paul Wirz in 1919

Shrunken heads are fascinating and repulsive at the same time. They are sought-after trophies, above all by European collectors. On average, the MKB receives offers of genuine or fake shrunken heads – of monkeys or sloths or fabricated from goatskin – once or twice a year, either as a gift or for sale.

This shrunken head was purchased by the dealer Oldman in London in 1918. A donor, who wished to remain anonymous, enabled the MKB to buy it. At the time, the museum was in the process of assembling a “comprehensive” collection of skull trophies. Responding to an offer

to purchase an additional specimen from Ecuador, Felix Speiser wrote in 1925: “We already have one Jivaro head, but could well do with a second one.” In those days, the trade with shrunken heads was already illegal.

Among the Shuar, as the Jivaro are called today, shrunken heads played a role in connection with war and fertility. Production was accompanied by a complex sequence of rituals. After detaching the head from the body, the bones and muscles were plucked out through an incision at the back of the head. The remaining skin was then shrunk to size in a mixture of hot water and sand. Sealing the eyes and mouth prevented the spirit of the victim causing damage.

87 Shrunken head; Ecuador; skin, hair, feather, cotton, beetle wing; IVc 662; purchased from Messrs Umlauff in 1918

In New Ireland, human skulls were overmodelled to commemorate deceased relatives and so that their lifeforce could pass on to their descendants. Skulls played an important role in the complex cycle of mortuary feasts and rituals. They stood as representations of the dead, but their features were not formed to correspond with the appearance of any specific deceased relative. Wax served as modelling material, while the eye sockets and hair were formed out of clay. The eyes received their lively look from the opercula of turbo snails. Overmodelled skulls were sought-after collector’s items in Europe.

88 Overmodelled skull; New Ireland, Papua New Guinea; bone, wax, lime, operculum (*Turbo petholatus*); Vb 5009; purchased from Arthur Speyer I in 1920

Killing – Coveting

The use of animal products is taken for granted: they are used as food, and made into tools, weapons, everyday objects, and clothes. For long periods in history, local and regional availability, climatic conditions, processing options, and the position accorded to animals in a society’s value system and conception of the world were crucially important.

So, is the animal kingdom a resource that humans can use at will?

Hunting elephants for ivory

The range of the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) once extended from Syria across Eurasia as far as China; now it is restricted to parts of South and South East Asia. The African bush elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) was once found across the whole of the continent of Africa; today its habitat is restricted to sub-Saharan Africa. Even long before the colonial era, the reasons for its shrinking habitat lay in human population growth, the development of farmland, as well as hunting and poaching activities.

Coveted raw material – The mass culling of elephants began in the 19th century when ivory became a coveted raw material; elephant populations plummeted as a result. Strict controls and the establishment of reserves resulted in recovering populations by the mid-20th century, but shortly after decolonization in the 1960s, tens of thousands of elephants were again being killed to supply the demand for ivory in the countries of the north. By 2016, the number of elephants in Africa was only around 350,000. The situation with Asian elephants is less dramatic because their tusks are less profitable.

Flourishing trade – An elephant’s tusks continue to grow throughout its life. The record weight is currently 104 kilogrammes. Despite international restrictions and national legislation, the trade in ivory continues to flourish. Merely to allow the acquisition of objects

made of ivory or with ivory parts was certainly not a reason to kill elephants, yet it is nevertheless surprising just how glowingly such objects are described, and how they appear to enhance the status of whole collections.

The fascination of elephants – Elephants feature in myths and legends, and are associated with the dignity, courage, and power of rulers. These grey giants serve as work animals, and have also gone to war, which explains why they can symbolize military might. Not least, they also play a role in many religious contexts: in early Christian iconography, they decorated choir stalls, capitals or portals, even the choir façade of the Basel Minster facing the Rhine.

Hardly any other deity is as ubiquitous as the elephant-headed Ganesh, the Lord of Beginnings and Lord of Learning. Legends relate how Ganesh acquired his elephant head. In the best-known story, his lonely mother, Parvati, created him. When her consort Shiva returned home after a long absence, he beheaded Ganesh. Parvati insisted Shiva undo the deed; instead he combined Ganesh's torso with the head of the first creature to pass by – and that happened to be an elephant. Parvati embraced Ganesh and declared him to be the Lord of Hosts, and Shiva decreed that Ganesh was to be invoked at the beginning of every ritual.

89 Figure of Ganesh; Guledgudda, Karnataka, India; wood, pigment, mirror; IIa 8886; deposited with the Basel Mission by missionary Johann Gottlieb Kies in 1856, gifted by the Basel Mission in 2015

This *thangka* depicts twelve scenes from the life of the historical figure of Buddha Shakyamuni. Queen Maya is asleep in the royal palace (at right). As she dreams, a cloud bearing a white elephant envelops her. Following her “immaculate conception”, at Lumbini she gives birth to her son, the future Buddha: painlessly, the child is delivered from her right hip. According to one legend, Buddha Shakyamuni in a previous incarnation was the snow-white elephant Chaddanta with six tusks.

90 *Thangka*; Tibet; 18th c.; cotton cloth, tempera, wood, metal; IId 13652; purchased from Gerd-Wolfgang Essen in 1998

“An old elephant mask” was purchased in 1983 from Maria Wyss-Hubermann, who sold African art from her gallery in Basel.

Until the beginning of the 20th century in the grasslands of Cameroon, elephants, the right to hunt them, and to share out the kill was associated with authority, war, and prosperity. Locals killed elephants both for their meat and tusks. Elephant masks were used in the rituals of a number of men's societies, which in their early days had authority in matters of warfare and lawmaking. Their character changed during the colonial era when they evolved into prestigious associations open to those with sufficient means to buy their way in.

91 Elephant mask; Bamileke, Cameroon Grasslands; feathers, glass beads, bamboo, cotton, raffia; III 21772, III 23542; purchased from Maria Wyss in 1983

“A superb collection” was how an annual report hailed the arrival at the museum of some 200 objects from Central Africa. Erwin Federspiel from the Swiss town of Laufen had collected them; he “has spent several years in the Congo as station head on the Upper Ituri, from where he has undertaken lengthy explorations”. As an employee in the military service of the so-called Congo Free State, he had excellent access to objects of all kinds. Trumpets like this are known from Liberia to Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo: they were used to honour rulers or elders with “the elephant's voice”, or to accompany wedding and circumcision ceremonies, burials, courtly rituals and coronations. They were also used to call people to work or as a warning of danger. During hostilities, their sound was intended to inspire warriors to victory.

92 Transverse horn or trumpet; Democratic Republic of the Congo; ivory; III 1152; purchased from Erwin Federspiel in 1901

“An addition to an original collection” was the description of the portion of the collection that came to the MKB from the “German Inner African Expedition” of 1910-1912. Leo Frobenius was a member of the expedition; *in situ* – hence “original collection” – he had collected this object, and stated for context that it was an instrument called *iroke* used by diviners of the Ifá oracle to contact the spirit being Orunmila. UNESCO classified the oracle as intangible cultural heritage in 2008. Divination is based on complex linguistic and arithmetical formulas interpreted by a diviner when difficult decisions are required. At the start of the process of divination, the diviner strikes a divination tray with the ivory tapper to invoke the spirit being.

93 Ifá tapper; Yoruba, Nigeria; ivory; III 4629; purchased from Leo Frobenius in 1912

These tusks are from the collection of the Basel Mission. The older of the two large ones is assumed to have come from the hoard that belonged to Sultan Ibrahim Njoya, the ruler of the Bamum kingdom (present-day Cameroon), who gifted it to the missionary Martin Göhring. Njoya showed interest in “European items and conditions”, but was cautious. Persuaded by his mother, he facilitated the mission’s educational projects. In return, Göhring helped him with his grievance about the repressive conduct of German merchants. Göhring was able to convince Njoya to allow the Mission trading company to handle Bamum’s ivory trade. The Basel Mission was in charge of the company until 1917.

A fellow missionary gifted the second large tusk to Hans Knöpfli because he did not want to have “to transport it back home”. He had bought it in the Forest Department that was responsible for monitoring elephant numbers.

The small tusk is presumably from a young animal. The Basel Mission’s 1888 register of items received lists three tusks. Two of them are no longer in the collection. Were they sold or exchanged for something else? What was this raw material intended for, as a source of income or as material for the Mission’s work?

94 Tusk; Kumba, Cameroon; ivory; III 25891; deposited with the Basel Mission by Martin Göhring in 1911, gifted by the Basel Mission in 2015

95 Tusk; Fouban, Cameroon; ivory; III 27845; deposited with the Basel Mission by Hans Knöpfli in 1969, gifted by the Basel Mission in 2015

96 Small tusk; presumably from Togo or Ghana; ivory; III 27860; gifted by the Basel Mission in 2015

“As with most of the world’s ethnographic collections, last year’s acquisitions bore the stamp of Benin. Recall that on account of the destruction of Benin City by the British, there have emerged products of an ancient craft tradition of singular character unsurpassed in the workmanship of the Negro peoples. The spoils of Benin were cast upon the market this year, and we viewed it as our duty to secure for our collection at least some exemplars of a civilization that has now passed from sight for all time”. This entry in the museum’s yearbook for 1899 describes quite standard acquisition and dispersal practices of the era.

The carvings on the tusk depict dignitaries from the royal court wearing pearl necklaces, ceremonial swords, and robes with coral beads. Europeans are identifiable by means of their swords and weapon belts. A cross on the breast of one of the figures suggests the involvement of Portuguese knights. Was the tusk scorched during a punitive expedition?

97 Tusk; Benin City, Nigeria; ivory; III 1038; purchased from Messrs Umlauff in 1899

“By far the most valuable item among the African additions is a long elephant tusk from ancient Benin; it is beautifully decorated and has a handsome golden-brown patina. This

splendid item was acquired from an original private collection. It is decorated with painstakingly carved bands of ornamentation. Carved in flat relief at intervals between the

bands is seen a sword typical in form of those from ancient Benin. Together with the other objects from Benin, this tusk now represents one of the most distinguished ornaments within the African department.” This was the assessment of a museum employee. As with other items, the tusk was looted during the punitive expedition undertaken by the British in 1897.

98 Tusk; Benin City, Nigeria; ivory; III 6694; purchased from Messrs Umlauff in 1926

The Portuguese first landed on the coast of Sierra Leone in 1440. Imports of ivory saltcellars and spoons are known to have reached Portugal as early as 1504. Along with forks, handles for knives and daggers, as well as “oliphant” hunting horns, they were manufactured specifically for the European market in the wake of the encounter between the two cultures. To date, no European models for the shape and decoration of the saltcellars have been identified; it is presumed they were inspired by the Sapi culture of Sierra Leone. They display typical motifs such as man-eating crocodiles or men bearing swords and shields. The scene showing the man with a child on his lap remains enigmatic. This item is from the collection of the leather manufacturer Robert von Hirsch.

99 Saltcellar; Sapi, Sierra Leone; ca. 1500; ivory, horn, bonding cement; III 21474; bequest of Robert von Hirsch in 1978

Only the spoon purchased from Messrs Umlauff rates a mention in the museum’s yearbook. The two others came from a dealer in Antwerp, H. Salomon, who periodically offered for sale items from the Congo Free State that he himself had bought from travellers, sailors, and other suppliers.

100 Spoon; Upper Kasai, Democratic Republic of the Congo; ivory; III 3420; purchased from H. Salomon in 1910

101 Spoon; Democratic Republic of the Congo; ivory; III 3681; purchased from H. Salomon in 1911

102 Spoon; Democratic Republic of the Congo; ivory; III 6667; purchased from Messrs Umlauff in 1926

Asian elephants have been revered and used for centuries. Influenced by the Mughal court, the established practice of ivory carving was continued in India. Craftsmen preferred African ivory: while soft and elastic, it had a firmer structure than Asian ivory, and was thus more easily fashioned.

Representing rulers, Hindu deities, scenes from daily life, or chess pieces, these figurines were initially intended for an Indian clientele. In the late 18th century, they gained popularity with European travellers as souvenirs – although it is not always clear whether they were intended as decorative figures or chess pieces. The elephant carrying the howdah is assumed not to be a chess piece; the richly painted camel driver, however, might well be the equivalent of the bishop in western chess.

103 Figurines; India; pre-1888; ivory, pigment; IIa 9197, 9200; deposited with the Basel Mission before 1888, gifted by the Basel Mission in 2015

pachisi is a race game from which European games such as “Eile mit Weile” (particularly in Switzerland) and Ludo are derived. A throw of a rectangular die determines the number of fields a player can move. Rectangular dice were used in all South Asian games of dice. Early finds originated in the advanced culture of the Indus Valley (2600-1800 BC) in present-day Pakistan.

104 Rectangular die; Kathmandu, Nepal; ivory, pigment; IIa 1522; gifted by Emil Rauch in 1952

ganjifa (playing card) is the name of an Indian card game that was played by the Mughal emperor Babur (1483-1530); it was developed by his successor, Akbar (1556-1605). Eight-toned Mughal *ganjifa* cards predominate in northern India. For each colour there are two picture cards and ten number cards whose value is determined by the number of pips painted on them. The emperor's card game has twelve colours; seven colours represent the cavalry, infantry, armoured soldiers, elephants, fortresses, a fleet of ships, and a paymaster. The five remaining colours have associations with Indian mythology. Mughal *ganjifa* is a game of military strategy with secular and courtly features.

These playing cards are from the collection of Jean Eggmann. From 1948 to 1962, he worked as the head of finance and administration at Ciba Pharma in Bombay where he discovered a passion for collecting: "Some things I bought on the spur of the moment; others I had to think about for two or three weeks. Even then, prices were not cheap." He is said to have enjoyed admiring these cards again and again.

105 *ganjifa* playing cards; Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh, India; ivory, tempera; Ila 11359-11374; gifted by Jean Eggmann in 2003

In all Naga tribes, men wear armlets like this. In some tribes, they represent wealth; in others, they are reserved for successful warriors. This item of jewellery is part of a collection that was sold to the MKB by Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann. He was a trained anthropologist who, in his own words, "took the opportunity to collect as much as possible on my 1936/37 Naga Expedition that was primarily focussed on the material aspect of the culture". A staunch National Socialist, Kauffmann sold items from his collection to museums in Basel, Zurich and Cologne.

106 Armlet; Zunheboto, Nagaland, India; ivory, resinous substance; Iib 1244; purchased from Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann in 1937

Japan as a consumer of ivory

Before the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) prohibited the ivory trade in 1989, three quarters of the world's raw ivory was processed in Asian workshops. Between 1980 and 1989, Japan consumed some 800 tons of ivory a year (almost 40 per cent of the total annual global volume). The country's carvers used the largest share of it to make business and personal seals, and musical instruments with ivory components – from piano keys to the tips of violin bows.

netsuke are carved and usually painted figurine toggles that attached things such as a purse, seal or medicine box to the sash of a kimono, a pocketless garment. Depicting figures and scenes from religious or everyday life, they can be made of wood, stone, horn, metal or ivory. Master carvers used as many as 200 different saws, files, chisels, borers, knives and sanding tools. To make a *netsuke* by hand could take up to two months.

An economist by training, Alice Keller was the first female executive in the Japanese branch office F. Hoffmann-La Roche & Co. AG. With some interruptions, she lived in Tokyo from 1926 to 1937. She had a passion for the cultures of the Far East; her substantial and diverse collection came to the MKB in 1998.

107 Woodworker turning a bowl; Japan; ivory; IId 12051; gifted by Alice Keller in 1995

108 Two porters carrying a lady in a sedan chair; Japan; ivory; IId 12052; gifted by Alice Keller in 1995

109 Old man reclining above a water jar; Japan; ivory; IId 12053; gifted by Alice Keller in 1995

110 Snail on a leaf; Japan; ivory, wood; IId 12057.01; gifted by Alice Keller in 1995

111 Female mask from Nōh theatre; Japan; ivory; IId 12058; gifted by Alice Keller in 1995

112 Old woman with basket of vegetables; Japan; ivory; IId 12076.01; gifted by Alice Keller in 1995

The bequest of Burckhardt-Burckhardt was hailed as one that made “a valuable addition of lovely pieces to the collection”; it included *netsuke*.

113 Dog of Fo, a guardian figure, known also as “Buddha’s dog”; Japan; 18th c.; ivory; IId 1334; from the bequest of Hans Burckhardt-Burckhardt in 1923

114 Bird upon a rock in flowing water; Japan; 18th c.; ivory; IId 1333; from the bequest of Hans Burckhardt-Burckhardt in 1923

Carl Leonhard Burckhardt-Reinhardt joined his father-in-law’s cotton exporting company at Alexandria after marrying in 1928. In 1932, he travelled to Japan on business. The trip laid the foundation for his collection of East Asian art. Both it and his collection of Egyptian art were gifted to the MKB.

115 Hotei, the god of bliss, with an unfurled scroll; Japan; ivory; IId 8289; from the bequest of the Burckhardt-Reinhardt Stiftung in 1973

116 Hotei, the god of bliss; Japan; ivory; IId 8292; from the bequest of the Burckhardt-Reinhardt Stiftung in 1973

117 Galloping horse and crouching animal; Japan; ivory; IId 8287; from the bequest of the Burckhardt-Reinhardt Stiftung in 1973;

118 Animal crouching on three bamboo stalks; Japan; ivory; IId 8291; from the bequest of the Burckhardt-Reinhardt Stiftung in 1973

119 Bearing a flute, young Yoshitsune vanquishes a light-fingered monk; Japan; ivory, metal, silk cord, quartz; IId 8301; from the bequest of the Burckhardt-Reinhardt Stiftung in 1973

Most of the collections held by the Gewerbemuseum Basel (Museum of Industry; later the Museum of Design) were “to be distributed among suitable museums” once it became clear in 1989 that its educational, collecting, and exhibition policies had become irreconcilable. Assessment of its mixed lots so far has been patchy; this means these valuable objects have still to be contextualized.

120 Clawed demon crouching on a mushroom or hat; Japan; ivory; IId 10900; on permanent loan from the Gewerbemuseum Basel since 1989

121 Man seated while holding an animal; Japan; ivory; IId 10908; on permanent loan from the Gewerbemuseum Basel since 1989

122 Man seated with a basket; Japan; ivory; IId 10913; on permanent loan from the Gewerbemuseum Basel since 1989

123 Squatting monkey; Japan; ivory; IId 10910; on permanent loan from the Gewerbemuseum Basel since 1989

124 Monkey carrying a youngster on its shoulders; Japan; ivory; IId 10915; on permanent loan from the Gewerbemuseum Basel since 1989

125 Chick hatching from an egg; Japan; ivory; IId 10918; on permanent loan from the Gewerbemuseum Basel since 1989

126 Goat; Japan; ivory; IId 10975; bequest of August Meyer-Gass to the Gewerbemuseum Basel in 1977, on permanent loan from the Gewerbemuseum Basel since 1989

127 Seated man with frog and landscaped case (*inro*) in three sections; Japan; ivory, porcelain, colour, silk cord; IId 10867; on permanent loan from the Gewerbemuseum Basel since 1989

netsuke were and remain popular with collectors. On the one hand, travellers returned home with them either for themselves or as gifts; on the other, dealers offered them for sale on the market. Individual items can still achieve a high price today. This had a secondary effect in Japan: after a period of neglect starting in the 1870s, this type of craftwork saw its status enhanced in the 20th century.

Individuals regularly gifted single *netsuke* to the MKB. Among them was the well-travelled Gotthelf Kuhn whose interests found expression in “the museum’s magnificent collections

covering Ancient Egypt to East Asia”; another was the sister-in-law of museum employee Felix Speiser, for whom such “unsophisticated products” held little appeal.

- 128 Resting ox; Japan; ivory; IId 1116; gifted by Elisabeth Speiser-Riggenbach in 1917
129 Seated man with beaker and tortoise; Japan; ivory, tobacco juice stain; IId 8618; gift from the bequest of Gotthelf Kuhn in 1975
130 Fish and monkey; Japan; ivory; IId 8619; gift from the bequest of Gotthelf Kuhn in 1975
131 Mussels or water hyacinth bulbs; Japan; ivory, colour, lacquer; IId 13395; gifted by Sigrid Jäger from the collection of Wilhelm Zimmermann-Balmer in 1998

Not only *netsuke* or *inro* were popular with collectors; other objects that testified to artistic skill and a classic aesthetic were also collected.

- 132 Box with dragon motif; Japan; ivory; IId 8311; from a bequest of the Burckhardt-Reinhardt Stiftung in 1973

Both these figures belonged to Rudolph Iselin, a nephew of Fritz Sarasin. He accompanied his uncle on his last trip to Siam (Thailand) and Cambodia in 1931. Between 1937 and 1956, Iselin was a member of the museum board, and was involved in the MKB’s European and photographic collections.

- 133 Man with luggage and hat; Tokyo, Japan; ivory; IId 5900; from the bequest of Rudolf Iselin in 1963
134 Man with a basket of fruit and a flower; Japan; ivory; IId 5901; from the bequest of Rudolph Iselin in 1963

These types of figures were produced for the tourist market from the 1870s on. At the beginning, Yokohama was the only place of production; towards the end of the century the port cities of Tokyo, Kobe, Osaka, and Nagasaki joined the lucrative business. This figure depicts a craftsman.

- 135 Male figure; Japan; ivory; IId 15649; gift from the bequest of Michael Kessler-Oeri in 2019

Japan’s Festival of Dolls traces its roots back to a ritual of the Heian period (794-1192): negative energy was transmitted to straw dolls that were then committed to the water. That purification ceremony gave rise to today’s festival in which families pray for the health and matrimonial happiness of their daughters. Each year before March 3, bride and groom dolls are installed in homes; in line with a household’s wealth, up to 13 other figures costing up to 2,000 Swiss francs, depending on materials and design, are also installed.

These seven dolls represent an imperial bride and groom accompanied by five musicians, all decked out in their finest attire, and lavishly fashioned with hands and heads of ivory. The donor was the daughter of Johann-Rudolf Merian-Zaeslin who, in the late 19th century, worked in Japan for a Basel silk importer and lived with his wife in Yokohama, the birthplace of their daughter Julie Hermine Kiku. It is not known if these dolls belonged to her or if she celebrated the Festival of Dolls with them herself, or if the family made a point of collecting them out of interest.

- 136 Set of seven dolls; Japan; fabric, ivory, wood, pigment; IId 6676a-g; gifted by Kiku Merian in 1965

China as a consumer of ivory

China too was an early centre of ivory carving: items for personal use, small-scale religious sculptures or emblems of rank for civil servants were produced for the domestic market. As of the 16th century, Christian devotional images were produced for export to Europe. Later on, the range of exports expanded to include fans, buttons, brooches, caskets, games, and handles for umbrellas and walking sticks.

China is believed to have been the world’s largest market for ivory since the 1990s, not least

because ivory objects have become status symbols with the country's rising middle class. To meet demand, ivory has mainly been imported from Africa. On 1st January 2018, China banned the ivory trade. Initial reports suggest demand is falling; others suggest the trade is continuing. In the absence of controls, consumers' views are unlikely to change because ivory still enjoys high status among the Chinese.

Werner Rothpletz worked in Indonesia for Bataafsche Petroleum Maatschappij in the 1930s. The museum purchased portions of his collection, but he bequeathed the bulk of it to the museum, including these two figures.

137 Old man crouching, after a depiction of the god of longevity; China; ivory, colour, lacquer; IId 7385; gift from the bequest of Werner Rothpletz in 1981

138 Seal with a handle in the form of a dragon-like animal; China; ivory; IId 7386; gift from the bequest of Werner Rothpletz in 1981

Practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine used figures like this called "Doctor's Ladies" when treating female patients. Rather than point to their own body, far less expose it, lady patients would indicate on the figurine where the source of their discomfort was located. This diagnostic procedure dates back to the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing eras (1646-1912). More recent interpretations, however, have suggested that these figures were erotic toys.

139 Figurine for medical diagnosis or an erotic toy; China; ivory, colour; IId 7391, 7391a; from the bequest of Werner Rothpletz in 1981

Even in its first inventory catalogue of 1862, the Basel Mission lamented that "the Chinese generally are passionate gamblers. There is not a village or hamlet to be found without a gambling house or professional gamblers, for all that gambling is outlawed." The accomplishments of the carvers who produced games of skill for their home market as well as chess figures and delicate souvenirs for the European market do merit a mention at least.

140 Game of chance or game of skill; China; ivory; IId 9619.01-05; deposited with the Basel Mission before 1888, gifted by the Basel Mission in 2015

141 Game of skill; China; ivory; IId 9621.01, 9621.02; deposited with the Basel Mission before 1888, gifted by the Basel Mission in 2015

142 Puzzle of the nine connected rings; China; ivory, brass; IId 9626; deposited with the Basel Mission before 1888, gifted by the Basel Mission in 2015

143 Game of skill; China; ivory; IId 6801a-c; purchased in Holland in 1968 through a native of Basel called Mutz

This item has four sections, each separately fashioned. The hollow sphere containing a further six movable spheres within it is particularly intriguing. There is evidence such finely worked decorative items were made as long ago as the 14th century.

144 Decorative object; China; ivory; IId 9615.01-02; deposited with the Basel Mission before 1862, gifted by the Basel Mission in 2015

Europe as a consumer of ivory

The demand for ivory in Europe and North America increased at the end of the 18th century. Around 1880, Europe processed over half a million kilogrammes of ivory; it was used for musical instruments, billiard balls, false teeth, chess figures, handles for walking sticks and umbrellas, fans, napkin and curtain rings, writing and sewing sets, devotional items, jewellery and other luxury items. On the world market, the price of ivory surged as a result. British auction houses in Liverpool and London dominated the international trade in ivory, although Antwerp and Hamburg also had a substantial share of the market. Both demand and the volume of trade fell on the outbreak of World War I. According to the activist website

Avaaz, the EU is now the largest dealer in legal ivory; some illegal trade still comes through Europe, with Britain the main transit point.

Nowadays the 52 white keys on an 88-key piano are covered in strips of plastic, bone or mammoth ivory. Elephant ivory was long used to cover the white piano keys as it retained its shape and was resistant to wear. Suitable ivory is still used for restoration work – if it can be found.

145 Piano key coverings, repair materials; Europe; ivory; on loan from Martin Vogelsanger

This baton was used to conduct a band that played during a procession to mark a 50th anniversary; it is not known what exactly was being celebrated.

146 Baton; Frankfurt an der Oder, Germany; wood, ivory; VI 68565; gifted by Louise Bojanus in 1997

Ivory is said to have a special feel, one that is soft and pleasantly warm. When polished, it does not roughen the skin. As it is also moisture-resistant and durable, it is good for making handles of all sorts. Umbrellas or walking sticks with a finishing touch of ivory *do* have an air of distinction.

147 Lady's umbrella; Basel, Switzerland; metal, silk, ivory; VI 19292; gifted from an anonymous bequest, presented by Samuel Burckhardt in 1951

Monogrammed parasol; Basel, Switzerland; steel wire, fabric, lace, wood, ivory; VI 39325; gifted by Sibylle Schamböck in 1971

Monogrammed umbrella; Basel, Switzerland; bamboo, silk, ivory; VI 69621; gifted by anonymous in 2001

Helene Rauch from Basel had a liking for elegant accessories. In the 1940s she gifted 17 umbrellas and 7 walking sticks to the museum. She appears to have collected them out of interest. Many of them were made with precious materials like silk, silver and gold. Some index cards also list ivory as a material, but they are not always accurate: sometimes bone was used to give the appearance of ivory.

148 Walking stick; Basel, Switzerland; wood, ivory, metal, rose gold; VI 16764; gifted by Helene Rauch in 1943

Towards the end of the 19th century, manufacturers such as Glaser und Sohn (Dresden) or Carl Roth (Würzburg) specialized in articles for students. They sold a good selection of ivory handles into which the emblem of a students' association was inset. Here a porcelain rosette bears the emblem of the Swiss Zofingia students' association.

149 Walking stick of the Zofingia students' association; Basel, Switzerland; wood, ivory; VI 19758; gifted by T. Matzinger in 1951

The lady who donated this walking stick wrote: "It is said to be Indian in origin. My father got it from a man, either for safekeeping or as payment. He told my father that a maharaja had gifted it to him. We never heard another word from the man."

150 Collapsible walking stick; India (?); ivory; VI 61871; gifted by Liselotte Nussbaumer-Kieser in 1987

Solid and durable, ivory is suitable for use in certain instruments and tools. At the same time, it lends items an air of distinction. With an ivory finish, these aids are utensils and status symbols in one. This compass was bought at a cost of two francs in a second-hand shop in Basel in 1910, along with some 100 other items intended for the MKB collection. Little is known about the origins of individual items.

151 Pocket compass; Basel, Switzerland; ca 1800; ivory, brass, paper; VI 4451; bought in a second-hand shop in Basel in 1910

This pair of binoculars can focus only a very short distance – perhaps it was intended for use at the opera or theatre. It was bought in the London shop of the renowned opticians Dollond.

152 Binoculars; London, Great Britain; wood, horn (?), glass, ivory, cardboard case covered in fish skin; VI 17492; gifted by Frau H. Meier in 1945

It used to be tricky to pull on narrow lace or silk gloves, so it helped to widen them with a flat implement that allowed the hands to slip into them. This glove widener was part of the wedding outfit of someone from the city.

153 Glove widener; Basel, Switzerland; ivory, metal; VI 18703; gifted by Hans Burckhardt in 1949

Butchers regularly draw their knives across a sharpening steel to sharpen and straighten the blades of their knives. A sharpening steel often hangs from a loop in the butcher's belt, and so is always to hand. The handle on this steel is made of alternating bands of brown and white ivory.

154 Sharpening steel; Vienna, Austria; steel, ivory; VI 57530; purchased from Wolfgang Riedl in 1983

Before the four-tined forks we are familiar with today came into use, forks for a long time had only two tines. An ivory handle enhanced the look of an everyday eating utensil and turned it into a table ornament. This table fork was sold in 1914 by an antiques dealer called Jakob Lörch who collected many different everyday objects and in letters offered to sell them to the museum.

155 Fork; Cham, Switzerland; 18th/19th century; ivory, iron; VI 6279; purchased from Jakob Lörch in 1914

A shoe buttoner was a useful tool when pulling on leather boots or shoes with small buttons: pushed through a buttonhole, the hook caught a button and drew it back through the buttonhole. We do not know when this shoe buttoner entered the collection or who supplied it.

156 Shoe buttoner; Europe; ca 1900; metal, ivory; VI 70969

This devotional panel depicts the Crucifixion with Mary Magdalene kneeling before Christ whose suffering and death are associated with the Instruments of the Passion, also shown.

157 Devotional panel; France; ca 1750; ivory, card, fabric; VI 15960; purchased from E. Nägeli in 1941

This devotional panel depicts the Annunciation of the Lord by the angel Gabriel (at right). He utters the words "Hail Mary, full of grace", the opening line of one of Roman Catholicism's most important prayers, the *Ave Maria*. Along the top edge, the Holy Spirit is seen in the form of a dove.

158 Devotional panel; France; ca 1750; ivory, card, fabric; VI 15961; purchased from E. Nägeli in 1941

In the 19th century, a new type of figure emerged in ivory art: pastoral types in traditional costume, peasant musicians, and tramps appeared in the cases in which the bourgeoisie displayed their ivory collections. These two shepherds were possibly nativity figures.

159 Figures; Rome, Italy; ivory; VI 49396a, VI 49396c; gifted by August Meyer in 1978

This case provides a neat storage solution for sewing implements: scissors, bodkin, thimble, and a container for needles all have their own space carved out of the ivory. A refined lady thus had to hand all the tools needed for an afternoon's sewing.

160 Sewing set; used in Switzerland, probably made in France; ca 1860; ivory, gilt metal; VI 66852; gifted by Getrud Krattiger in 1994

This item may look like a cigar, but inside it conceals a small writing set comprising a fountain pen, paper knife, ruler and pencil.

161 Writing set; Basel, Switzerland; ca 1890; tortoiseshell, ivory, paper, wood, tobacco, metal; VI 66264; source and date unknown

Folding sticks were used to make a crisp fold in a piece of card or paper. They were once much used in bookbinding and the graphic arts. It is believed this one was made for Europeans; it belongs to a collection that was purchased from the “Mittelschweizerische Geographisch-Commercielle Gesellschaft” in Aarau in 1918. The name of its previous British owner was given as Rivett-Carnac. As of 1896, he was listed as a full member of the “Aargauische Naturforschende Gesellschaft”; an annotation after his name reads “Oberst auf Schloss Wildegg”. A number of Britons called Rivett-Carnac were employed in the Indian Colonial Service.

162 Folding stick; India; ivory; Ila 630; purchased from Museum Aargau in 1918

The souvenir trade continues to flourish. Similar items made of ivory can still be obtained from auction houses today. Huge amounts of ivory were needed to make souvenirs even early on. Unlike the items for sale today, at least then products were said to have “a degree of craftsmanship” about them.

The collectors returned with these items from their “mission” in Ghana. They worked for the commercial branch of the Basel Mission, the Missions-Handlungs-Gesellschaft, that was established in 1859, and was later known as the Union Trading Company International (UTC).

Either Max (1906-1984) or his father Alfred (1875-1956) started the Opferkuch collection; both of them spent many years in Ghana working for UTC. These items were acquired before 1942. Ernst and Ruth Losch-Pulfer started their private collection in Accra when he worked for UTC as a mechanic in a garage from 1954 to 1964.

163 Row of elephants with a crocodile; Ghana; ivory; III 27587; gifted by Walter Opferkuch in 2009

164 Elephant figurines; Ghana; ivory; III 27569-27574; gifted by Walter Opferkuch in 2009

165 Elephant figurines; Accra or Kumasi, Ghana; ivory; III 27617-27620; gifted by Ernst & Ruth Losch-Pulfer in 2010

166 Letter opener; Asante (?), Accra or Kumasi, Ghana; ivory; III 27631; gifted by Ernst & Ruth Losch-Pulfer in 2010

167 Container for writing implements; Asante (?), Accra or Kumasi, Ghana; ivory; III 27638; gifted by Ernst & Ruth Losch-Pulfer in 2010

Plucking feathers

South America with 3000-odd species of bird and New Guinea with some 750 are veritable paradises for birds. The significance of the birds, their characteristics, and feathers within the cultural products and ritual practices of the two regions reflects this.

Bird-catchers – Hunters in search of feathers devised many methods that enabled them to catch birds: they could be brought down with a bow and arrow, captured in nets, or trapped with birdlime, for instance. Birds caught alive could be released once the sought-after feathers had been removed. Birds were also bred and reared for their feathers. Feathers and items made with them have been popular commodities and mediums of exchange throughout history.

Strutting in borrowed plumes – Feathers were traded internationally. At the beginning of the 20th century in many parts of Europe and North America, there was fierce debate about the use of feathers on women’s hats. Opposition to the practice gave rise to a campaign of nature conservancy, thanks to which a partial ban on the importation of feathers was

introduced, as was a temporary ban on the hunting of birds of paradise in New Guinea, for instance. In 1948, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) was founded to raise awareness about the need for nature and wildlife conservation in an effort to guarantee the sustainable use of the world’s resources.

“On all the streets and squares of the civilized world, from women’s hats there rises a cry from the throats of millions of murdered birds: people, ladies and girls, you men: protect our dwindling fellow species, doomed to destruction because of the trade in feathers.”

Carl Georg Schillings (1865-1921), Photographer, big-game hunter – and bird conservationist

Cloaks such as this were usually made by Maori men, especially in the second half of the 19th century. Reserved for important individuals, they were worn as prestigious objects at marriage ceremonies, funerary rituals, and festivals. Maori still wear them on special occasions.

The kiwi is a flightless and nocturnal bird. Presumably it lost the ability to fly because it had no natural enemies on the ground. That changed with the introduction of dogs and weasels in the 19th century. The Maori hunted kiwis for their meat and feathers, and with the arrival of white settlers and traders, their skins and feathers became popular mediums of exchange. A ban on hunting kiwis was introduced in 1896, and they have been a protected species since 1921.

The Maori still regard kiwi feathers as desirable objects, but now they are sourced only from dead birds that are handed in at collection points. Several successful initiatives have been launched to ensure the preservation of the kiwi, New Zealand’s national icon, and the Maori now see themselves as the birds’ guardians.

This cloak was part of the estate of the donor’s father; it had been used as a wall hanging. It is not known how it came into the family’s possession.

168 Feather cloak; Maori, New Zealand; 1840-1890; feathers of the kiwi (*Apertyx sp.*), of two species of parrot (*Nestor notabilis*, *Nestor meridionalis*), of the New Zealand pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*), and flax (*Phormium tenax*); Vc 1518; purchased from Maria Schröder in 1981

Shamans of the Tupinambá people presumably wore feather cloaks like this one. Some 500 red and black feathers of the scarlet ibis (*Eudocimus ruber*) were worked into its netted backing. It was believed that qualities possessed by birds, such as agility or keen vision, were transferred to those who made use of their feathers.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Tupinambá lived along the coast of Brazil where they had contact with European traders who, among other goods, exchanged axes, knives, and scissors for birds, bird skins, and feathers. It is not known how or when this cloak came to Switzerland or entered the collection of the “Mittelschweizerische Geographisch-Commercielle Gesellschaft”. A note states that it was worn at fancy-dress balls before 1918.

169 Feather cloak; Tupinambá, Amazon delta, Brazil; 1550-1650; cotton, feathers; IVc 657; purchased from the “Mittelschweizerische Geographisch-Commercielle Gesellschaft” in 1918

The kingfisher (*Alcedinidae*) numbers over 100 species, is the stuff of legends, has been reproduced on stamps and banknotes, was declared Bird of the Year in Switzerland in 2006,

and its feathers are a must-have in ritual feather ornaments. Our fascination with the bird is due to its shimmering blue feathers that from the time of the first Han dynasty in China (202 BC - AD 6/8) were used to decorate curtains, canopies, litters, and even whole rooms. Fewer feathers sufficed for a bridal wreath. To this day, the kingfisher symbolizes beauty as well as contented lovers.

From 1860, Adolf Krayer-Förster from Basel spent eight years in Shanghai as an employee of the British business Bowes Hanbury. On his trips throughout China, he bought items that he gifted to the museum gradually over a number of years. Some objects are believed to have come from the summer palace in Beijing that British troops destroyed as they sacked the city in 1860 during the Second Opium War (1856-1860). How Adolf Krayer-Förster came to own this particular one remains a matter of speculation.

170 Bridal wreath; China; sheet brass, wire, glass, kingfisher feathers; IId 26; gifted by Adolf Krayer-Förster in 1864

Birds of paradise have always been hunted in New Guinea. Their feathers were used to make splendid headdresses, and were highly prized as mediums of exchange or as a form of bride price. In the colonial era, the Germans, Dutch, and British also hunted birds; this led to a dramatic decline in the numbers of some species, and prompted the introduction of conservation measures.

Nowadays there is a ban on the export of bird skins and feathers, but tribesmen continue to hunt birds of paradise. There is increased demand for feathers particularly for major highland festivals that also attract large numbers of tourists. Currently only individual species with a very limited range are classed as endangered.

171 *gowe* bird of paradise feathers; Gargar, Papua New Guinea; feathers, skin; Vb 26929; purchased from Hanns Peter in 1973, previous owner/seller Nebi'man

172 *u'iwi* bird skin; Gargar, Papua New Guinea; feathers, skin; Vb 26933; purchased from Hanns Peter in 1973, previous owner/seller Yo'eno

173 *samun* bird skin, *Astrapia rothschildi*; Yupno Valley, Papua New Guinea; feathers, skin; Vb 30099; purchased from Christin Kocher Schmid in 1988

174 *yambage* feather ornament; Chimbu Valley, Papua New Guinea; feathers, skin, wood; Vb 18400; purchased from Werner Stöcklin in 1963

175 *rahami* hair ornament; Goroka, Papua New Guinea; feathers, skin, wood; Vb 18402; purchased from Werner Stöcklin in 1963

176 *baundo* headdress; Chimbu Province, Papua New Guinea; feathers, skin, wood; Vb 18403; purchased from Werner Stöcklin in 1963

177 *yau* bird skin; Iwam, Papua New Guinea; feathers, skin; Vb 24938; purchased from Gisela and Meinhard Schuster in 1966

178 *gove'bai* bird of paradise feathers; Gargar, Papua New Guinea; feathers, skin; Vb 26930; purchased from Hanns Peter in 1973, previous owner/seller Babi'an

179 Bird of paradise feathers; Asaro, Papua New Guinea; feathers, twine, strips of bark, newspaper, cloth; Vb 27568b; purchased from Michael Beisert in 1973

180 Ornament; Chimbu Province, Papua New Guinea; feathers of *Paradisaea rudolphi*; Vb 15019; from the bequest of Paul Wirz in 1958

181 Ornament; Chimbu Province, Papua New Guinea; feathers of *Paradisaea rudolphi*; Vb 15020; from the bequest of Paul Wirz in 1958

Skinning the land

Pelts or skins are prized materials for making clothes, protective shelters, and commercially valuable and profitable items. Occasionally they are also imbued with powerful cultural significance.

Pioneering trade – At the beginning of the 16th century, trappers and fur traders were among the pioneers of the European settlement and economic exploitation of North America. Commercial companies that marketed their goods followed them. Later on, the colonial endeavours of the British and French led to mass migration from Europe. This resulted in the displacement and even the annihilation of Native Americans.

Hunting bison – To provide land for settlers and to deprive the Plains Indians of their means of existence, the extermination of North America's bison herds was pursued. Army officers are known to have facilitated or even ordered their slaughter. Such an attitude could only benefit those involved in the lucrative trade in bison skins. Hunting parties from across the world were invited to participate in bison hunts, and world championships in bison shooting were held – with the U.S. Army providing the rifles and ammunition. By 1890, some 30 million animals had been killed. Only when all Native Americans had been forcibly relocated to reservations were conservation measures taken during the 20th century.

Bison as a means of existence – Europeans introduced the horse to North America; its adoption by Native Americans in the 18th century gave rise to an equestrian culture among them that enabled them to hunt bison intensively. Nevertheless, they killed only as many bison as they needed to survive. North America's largest mammal provided all of life's essentials: it was the most important source of food and leather, but also provided both spiritual and cultural inspiration.

The decorative painting of articles of clothing made from tanned and raw hides was an important tradition among the Native Americans of the Great Plains. Buffalo robes were worn for warmth in winter both by men and women, and on ceremonial occasions. Such robes were worn with the painted side facing out. A large cross symbolizes the cardinal points. The robe's central motif is a medallion flanked by two further cardinal crosses. Feather motifs appear in the robes worn by men.

This robe was bought in 1919 from the "Mittelschweizerische Geographisch-Commercielle Gesellschaft" in Aarau. Its collection grew thanks to its commercial activities and the various contacts that individuals in the town and canton had. Items in the collection came from a number of collectors; only the name of the master tanner Erwin Rothpletz is known.

It is not always certain that items are in fact made of bison hide. Curators often had no choice but to accept what collectors said; even today, the origins of items are not easily verified.

182 Robe; Central Plains, USA; ca 1800; leather (probably bison), pigments; IVa 164; purchased from Museum Aargau

This robe is decorated with images of pipes. Unusually, it has a slit in the middle that allowed it to be worn like a poncho. The collector from whom this item was bought later worked in the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in La Rochelle.

183 Robe; USA; early 19th century; painted hide (bison or deer); IVa 118; purchased from Etienne Loppé in 1919

"Once the bison disappeared, the hearts of my people collapsed to the ground, and they were unable to raise them again. No more happened after that."

Plenty Coups, Crow chief

"A cold wind blew across the prairie when the last bison fell... a wind of death for my people."
Sitting Bull, Lakota Sioux

Imitating – modelling

The urge to collect and display cultures in their alleged unity has made museums inventive places. Still seen there to this day are lifelike scenes in which are displayed objects collected in their place of origin and which are populated by naturalistic likenesses of people made of plaster, papier mâché or synthetic materials. Such an approach, however, draws on stereotypes, reproduces them, and establishes hierarchies between cultures.

Men and women to order – From the end of the 19th century until the Second World War, model figures were in great demand. Specialists like the Hamburg-based supplier of ethnographica Messrs Umlauff or Berlin's Replica Workshop produced catalogues with over one hundred different types of figure from across the globe – ranging from a Mongolian princess to a Fiji Islander or a Masai warrior. Such businesses supplied many ethnological museums across Europe. The MKB also placed orders for such model figures or commissioned them from sculptors.

Arbitrary depictions – Figures were modelled on the descriptions, photographs, and measurements of people provided by researchers and travellers on their return home. Physical dimensions, hair colouring, and suitable facial expressions conformed to clients' wishes, and "typical" representatives of indigenous groups were thus produced. At first glance, faceless museum figures intended to bring alive a cultural activity by adopting a "typical" pose appear less problematic. While they are meant to capture a moment that is true-to-life, what they create instead is the image of a static, inflexible culture. When exhibitions are redesigned, such figures often end up in the storeroom – as was the case here at the MKB. Once the plaster starts to crumble and the paint starts peeling, they tell us less about what is foreign than they do about our view of it.

MKB curators were pragmatic in their approach to this model figure: according to a note, ritual objects of the Marind-Anim people of New Guinea were "to be installed on a brown plaster figure". This figure is one of several that the museum ordered from Berlin's Replica Workshop in 1916. The museum in fact wanted a "South American type" that was not in the workshop's catalogue, however. Eventually a figure was cobbled together: a torso representing South East Asia was paired with a western Pacific head because it "at least more or less matches one of the many types represented in South America."

Alfred Grünwedel at Berlin's Royal Museum of Ethnology informed Fritz Sarasin in a letter from 1916: "I have discussed your wishes with the caster, and can inform you they are best met as follows:

1. Two New Caledonians: 2 feet with plinth as per catalogue 4003, plus arms and two sets of fingers and thumbs to attach;
2. Dayak man: 1 complete figure as per catalogue 4003 as a substitute for mask 5363; fingers and thumbs as per 1;
3. Gilbert warrior: 1 set of feet with plinth of 4003, hands thereof, plus mask of 5343."

184 Figure of a black-necked stork dema deity; Basel; polyurethane or plaster; Vb 5310; purchased in 1916 and recast by the MKB's Design & Technology Department in the 1980s

A member of Sri Lanka's indigenous Vedda people, "Perikabalai from Danigala mountain" was photographed some 125 years ago by Fritz and Paul Sarasin. They recorded his height, age, facial skin colour, waist, and chest size. Using that data and his photograph, a sculptor commissioned by MKB produced a plaster figure of him. Why did the museum choose Perikabalai as a model? We do not know.

Fritz Sarasin was pleased with the sculptor's work: "I can only say that this lifelike figure reproduces extraordinarily well the impression made by a living Vedda on a viewer; but not only that – the facial features and physical proportions of the body are grasped in such a way as to lend the figure great anthropological value."

185 Model figure: "a Vedda type"; Freiburg i.Br., Germany; plaster, artificial hair, colour; IIa 11262; made and sold by Friedrich Meinecke in 1908

"Fear of the camera often knew no bounds, especially as it was imagined that it could carry the soul away with it."

Fritz and Paul Sarasin: *Reisen [Travels] in Celebes II*

The sculptor who produced the likeness of Perikabalai also made these figures of a woman and child in plaster. It is not known who served as his models. The photographs taken by the Sarasins on their expedition to Sri Lanka show women in identical poses and with similar facial features. Were they the models for this female figure?

In past exhibitions, the male and female/child figures were installed next to one another to suggest a typical nuclear family as understood by Europeans. It is not known whether the models were acquainted or whether such a group was even possible given complex family and relationship structures.

186 Model figure: "a Vedda type"; Freiburg i.Br., Germany; plaster, artificial hair, colour; IIa 11263; made and sold by Friedrich Meinecke in 1908

In 1904, the MKB purchased Herero objects from German South-West Africa (present-day Namibia) from Carl Hoppe, a Hamburg-based seller of "curiosities". That same year, the Herero rebelled against their German colonial administrators. German troop numbers were reinforced; there was further conflict, concentration camps were established, and forced labour was introduced. It is estimated that by 1908, some 100,000 Herero and Nama had been killed. Nowadays we call it genocide.

A letter sent by Carl Hoppe to the museum demonstrates that both seller and buyer were aware of events: "As the doctor who collected these items during many years of residence in Herero country assured me, these items were not much worn; once the uprising is over, they will probably – much like the good pieces from the South Seas – soon become things of the past."

The MKB bought this figure in 1918 from Messrs Umlauff in Hamburg, and added it to the Herero objects it had acquired earlier. The identity of the model is not known. Plaster casts were routinely made in German prisoner-of-war camps for research purposes, however.

187 Model figure: "a Herero type"; Hamburg, Germany; plaster, papier mâché (?), glass, paint; III 27846; purchased from Messrs Umlauff in 1918

Belt; Namibia; leather, ostrich egg shell; III 1518; purchased from Carl Hoppe in 1904

Cap; Namibia; leather, iron beads, pelt; III 1519; purchased from Carl Hoppe in 1904

Leg bands; Namibia; leather, iron beads; III 1520a-g, III 1521a-g; purchased from Carl Hoppe in 1904

Casket; Namibia; leather, tortoise shell, cotton; III 1525; purchased from Carl Hoppe in 1904

Cloak; Namibia; calfskin, cowhide, iron beads; III 1531; purchased from Carl Hoppe in 1904

Necklaces; Namibia (?); iron and wooden beads, twine; III 4291, 4292; gifted by Fritz Sarasin, previously owned by von Beesten

Leg bands; Namibia (?); leather strap, iron beads; III 4295a-c; gifted by Fritz Sarasin, previously owned by von Beesten

Armband; Namibia (?); iron wire; III 4296; gifted by Fritz Sarasin, previously owned by von Beesten

Necklace, Namibia (?); ostrich egg, glass beads; III 4302; gifted by Fritz Sarasin, previously owned by von Beesten

Necklace; Namibia; wood, iron; III 5084; purchased from Arthur Speyer I in 1920

The museum bought this figure, described as a “fetish figure from Togo”, along with other items in 1925. Even during the sale, doubts were voiced as to the provenance and composition of the items. The expert opinion of the Berlin-based anthropologist Bernhard Ankermann was sought: “As for the problematic dance costume,... unfortunately I cannot offer you further details as it has been sent to you with no pertinent information. [...] As for the skull mask, its description as Togolese is certainly mistaken; without doubt it originated in the Cross River area, with the Ekoi, Keaka or Boki.”

The figure was eventually inventoried as a “Juju dancer” of the Ekoi, an ethnic group living along the border between Nigeria and Cameroon. “Juju” in West Africa refers to the supernatural or magical power believed to reside in certain objects. The concept held a particular fascination for European anthropologists.

When it was bought, the figure’s face was covered with a veil which was later cut open; the identity of the model is not known.

188 Model figure: a “Juju dancer”; Hamburg, Germany, Cross River, Nigeria (?); plaster, fabric; III 6320a-e; purchased from Messrs Umlauff in 1925

This white torso was used by the MKB’s Design & Technology Department in the 1990s as a mould for display figures. It was first wrapped in aluminium foil and lubricated to ensure easy removal of the casting material.

190 Torso of a male mannequin; synthetic material, aluminium foil, Vaseline; VI 72054

In 1999, the museum opened an exhibition themed around the Basel carnival (Fasnacht). It contains a reconstruction of a restaurant scene “animated” by plaster figures. One of the figures, Päuli, and two other men are shown tucking in to Basel specialities while a barmaid draws beer for them. Päuli and his pals are mute representatives of the common carnival reveller. Do they breathe life into the Fasnacht exhibition or do they freeze it in a moment that never was? Does the Spezi Clique’s handout from 1967 provide an answer?

“Mr sage dr’s jetzt dyttlig: Los,
e Basler Fasnacht gheert uff d Strooss
und het – kasch deybele and flueche –
imme Museum gar nytt z’sueche!”

“Let’s be clear: Listen here
Basel’s Fasnacht is at home on the streets,
Rage and curse all you like:
Its place is not in a museum!”

191 Model figure of a carnival reveller; Basel; plaster, fabric, wood, glass, artificial hair, paper; VI 72053; made by the MKB’s Design & Technology Department in 1999

René La Roche from Basel went hunting in British East Africa (present-day Kenya) from 1905 to 1906. He returned to the city with around 160 everyday items used by the local Wakamba people. He gifted his collection to the MKB; included in it was this lifecast of a 20-year-old “convict in shackles”. It is unclear how this encounter unfolded. The museum subsequently had a plaster cast of it made.

Having a lifecast made is an unpleasant experience: a heated moulding material is applied across the whole body, sometimes including the head (excluding the nostrils). While it cools, the model must remain motionless and cope with a limited supply of air for up to two hours before the moulding material is removed.

192 Model figure: “a Wakamba type”; Freiburg i.Br., Germany; plaster, paint, cotton;
III 27844.01, 27844.02; made and sold by Friedrich Meinecke in 1906
Armbands; Kitui, Kenya; copper; III2409-2411; gifted by René La Roche in 1906
Necklace; Kitui, Kenya; copper wire, glass beads; III2430; gifted by René La Roche in 1906
Anklet; Kitui, Kenya; copper; III 2435, 2437; gifted by René La Roche in 1906
Knee bands; Kitui, Kenya; copper, brass; III 2439, 2440; gifted by René La Roche in 1906

“I could hear nothing, and (saw nothing of) what happened...

But I was unable to breathe through my mouth.

My ears were blocked up, they were sore, sore they were;

and how I sweated,

was drenched, drenched in sweat,

and only when it was removed from my face

could I breathe properly again.”

Petrus Goliath in Witpütz (Namibia), 1931

Rangda the witch-queen and her apprentice Rarung are fiendish figures in Balinese dance dramas. The MKB commissioned these masks and costume pieces in Bali in the early 1970s. Once in Basel, they were assembled and installed in a major exhibition about Bali, and were on display in other exhibitions until 2007. Together with her opponent Barong, Rangda is the defining cultural figure on the holiday island of Bali.

193 Model figures: Rangda and Rarung; Basel; made by the MKB's Design & Technology Department in 1982
Masks and costume pieces; Saba, Bali, Indonesia; wood, gold leaf, mirror, goat hair, boar tusks, paint, fabric; IIc 17519a-l and IIc 17520a-k; made and sold by I Gusti Gede Raka in 1974

Intervention of Deneth Piumakshi Wedaarachchige and Ryser+Schonfeldt

Deneth Piumakshi Wedaarachchige “Voices of the Ancestors”

“After an emotional journey of 14 months, I am here to represent the awoken voices and questions raised by the people of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan community in Basel. To whom do these ancestral remains belong to? The answers remain with you ...”

Deneth Piumakshi Wedaarachchige

Voices of the Ancestors, 2020

Hand painted life size 3D SLA Print of the body of the artist with tattoos, plastic skull, real hair wig, clothes and shoes of the artist

Ryser+Schonfeldt «Wir wünschten wir hätten euch sagen hören ...»

“Dear Fritz and Paul,

Dealing with your legacy remains difficult. Especially when we look around at our society today and see how deeply engraved the traces of that inherited racism still are. We ask ourselves how we can deal with the silences around Swiss colonialism that remained for so long? How can we learn from the past and make it right for the future? We wish if you were still here today you would agree with us in saying: ‘We were mistaken. Now it is time to take responsibility – proactive and with all the consequences.’

Best regards, Sally und Vera”

Ryser+Schonfeldt

«Wir wünschten wir hätten euch sagen hören ...», 2020

3D SLA Print of Fritz und Paul Sarasin busts

Deneth Piumakshi Wedaarachchige, a Sri Lankan contemporary artist based in France, replicated her own body by producing a life size 3D-sculpture in order to confront the museum practice of exhibiting racialised display figures representing exoticized “Others”. In submitting herself to the violence inherent in this historical museological practice, Piumakshi reflected on her experience: “I wanted to bring to light the objectification of (their) bodies as ‘exotic’ and ‘primitive’ during colonial times in Sri Lanka in the 19th century. During the making of the sculpture, it was important for me to follow the same process that my ancestors had to go through 136 years ago, such as being measured, compared, photographed, and exhibited. The sculpture is part of a wider project. As part of the making of the sculpture, like my ancestors, I had to expose my half naked body in front of two Swiss men, who scanned, measured, and photographed it, before sending their work to a Swiss male artist who compared and selected exact skin colours according to a colour chart, which were then painted onto the 3D printed figure. The sculpture is a representation of me as a contemporary Sri Lankan, brown skinned, female, immigrant artist living in France. It is also a vision of me coming to Switzerland and discovering the forgotten, stolen past of the Sri Lankan Adivasi (Sri Lankan aboriginal people formally referred to as Vedda) then bringing their unethically removed remains back to Sri Lanka with my own hands.”

With the work «Wir wünschten wir hätten euch sagen hören ...» (“We wish we heard you say ...”) the white Zurich based Swiss-Australian artist duo Ryser+Schonfeldt respond fictionally to the provocative questioning embedded in Deneth Piumakshi’s work “Voices of the Ancestors”. Piumakshi’s question is to ask to whom the Sri Lankan remains brought to Basel by Fritz and Paul Sarasin belong to? To grapple with this question, Ryser+Schonfeldt produced two raw, white busts of Fritz and Paul Sarasin. Their busts are 3D replicas of the cast-iron originals memorialising the two wealthy Basel born natural scientists, which are housed today in Basel’s Natural History Museum. By stripping back the symbolism idolising the founding fathers of the Museum of Culture, Ryser+Schonfeldt reveal the white privilege underwriting Swiss colonial involvement.

To further subvert the busts original memorializing purpose, Ryser+Schonfeldt find themselves in an imaginary exchange with Fritz and Paul Sarasin. The result is a fictitious agreement between the contemporary Swiss artist duo and the two Swiss colonial scientists giving voice to a demand for a proactive approach towards dealing with Switzerland’s colonial heritage – with all the consequences that entails. In imagining this fictional agreement, Ryser+Schonfeldt activate a reconciliatory gesture towards future museum practices by connecting historical legacy with the urgency of present responsibility.