

MIGRATION – MOVING THE WORLD

19 May 2017 – 21 January 2018

Migration is more than a temporary extraordinary situation, as the new exhibition at the Museum der Kulturen Basel goes to show. The display sheds light on diverse migration histories reaching back to the 15th century.

Twelve figures welcome the visitors to the show. They represent ancestors who are invoked for protection and help especially by people setting out on a journey. Beyond this mythological threshold, bluish glass figures lead the way along the grey passage towards a bright window. The installation Migration by the glassmaker Matteo Gonet evokes flows of migrants and refugees: a simple but impressive prelude to the subject.

Radiating from this node the individual stations extend across the exhibition space, encompassing the world, so to speak, and indicating that migration is a global phenomenon – and always has been. The exhibition spans the period from the 15th century, when the first Grisons migrants left their mountain valleys to become confectioners abroad, to the present day and the debate on the right of asylum for climate refugees, such as the inhabitants of the Pacific island state of Tuvalu, which is threatened by rising sea levels.

Various causes set the world in motion, including religious persecution, political oppression, labour migration, to name but a few. People migrate in order to survive or at least in the hope of a better life elsewhere. Cases include the French Huguenots who were persecuted at home for their faith; or indentured labourers from India who were shipped to plantations in Mauritius, Fiji, Burma or Ceylon. In contrast, many of the Swiss emigrants today choose to live abroad just for the kick of it or out of pure curiosity.

Migration is sometimes seen as an enrichment. Switzerland welcomed refugees from Tibet, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and boatpeople from Vietnam with open arms. More often, however, people perceive it as a threat: a current example is the Tortilla Wall between Mexico and the USA, documented in the exhibition by a series of photographs.

Invariably migration influences a society's ways of life, values as well as social and economic development. Lastly, Basel owes its pharmaceutical industry to the Huguenots. The fact that we modern Europeans have a sweet tooth has a lot to do with the work of migrant Swiss confectioners. China is unwilling to let its resident Kazakhs leave the country because they are important to the domestic tourist industry; the government even built a new city for them.

120 objects from the museum's collections show across themed stations how, over the centuries, migration has shaped the world. The silk ribbons from Basel and the Bernese sugar loaf are witnesses on the doorstep. In distant Tuvalu shell necklaces adorn existing and new homes and are given to travellers before they set out on a journey. Richly decorated reliquaries served travellers in Tibet as portable altars. The Afghan war rug represents a new generation of motifs in a long tradition of carpet making, while Swiss expats like to adorn their homes with wooden toy cows.

The exhibition, curated by Director Anna Schmid and Kathrin Schwarz, provides an ideal backdrop for a discussion on, among other things, the significance of the nation state, the logic of war economies, humans as commodities, the sense or nonsense of borders, and the disputed concept of "welcome culture". The visitors are not alone on this quest. More than a hundred figures – themselves migrants – act as participant narrators and attendants.