

OPIUM

20 March 2015 through 24 January 2016

Opium, a vast topic. The Museum der Kulturen Basel is spotlighting the drug in a special exhibition. Medicine, popular narcotic drug, ritual symbol, source of inspiration, devilry, cause of war, sacred smoke – there is hardly an epithet that has not been given to opium.

Archaeological records show that the cultivation of poppy reaches back to approximately 6,000 years BC, making it one of the oldest cultivated plants in the Mediterranean area. In Switzerland finds have been discovered in lake-dwelling settlements that trace back to ca. 3,000 BC. The nutty-smelling seeds have been used for the production of foodstuffs such as cooking oil and animal fodder since time immemorial. The sap extracted from the poppy's seedpods contains numerous alkaloids, including morphine, codeine and papaverine, and belongs to the earliest drugs of mankind – used for ritual, medical as well as intoxicating purposes. The “sleep-inducing poppy” has many therapeutic qualities, and was administered widely. In the Middle Ages the concoction theriac was applied to cure numerous illnesses and ailments. Paracelsus gave his patients laudanum, an opium tincture that was sold over the count up to the early 20th century. Among other names, the drug was also referred to as the “stone of immortality”. Babies’ dummies – commonly called “poppy dummies” – were dipped in diluted laudanum for the purpose of soothing restive infants.

Medicine and stimulant

In the 19th century opium smoking was a common practice in Basel's high society and regarded as a standard feature of *savoir-vivre*. Morphine and heroin, synthetic opium derivative, found their way “on to the streets” just like did LSD, which was discovered by Albert Hoffmann, and absinthe from the Jura. These “medicines-cum-stimulants” were not only popular among the members of high society, but also in artist circles where opium came to be regarded as a fertile source of inspiration. Many a writer, painter and poet became a slave of opium – just imagine, what poetry would be without Baudelaire! It was only towards the end of the 19th century that people began discussing the addictive dangers of regular opium consumption. In 1920 Great Britain banned the free sale of opiates, Germany followed suit in 1929. Switzerland merely made the production and sale of opiates subject to an official permit in 1924, as regards cannabis products in 1951, but consumption remained legal. Morphine, probably the most powerful analgesic drug, remains indispensable in the treatment of severe and terminal illnesses. Hence opium is still cultivated legally today, albeit under strict security measures.

The message

The exhibition addresses all aspects of opium, including its history, the cultivation of poppy, the drug trade as well as the tools and paraphernalia used in cultivation and consumption. Next to that, it also focuses on the experience of intoxication as de-

scribed by poets and authors known as notorious opium smokers and “eaters”, respectively. The exhibition follows the trail of the sticky brown substance through all its repulsive, inspirational, mythical, poetic, frightening, and fictional dimensions. To sum it up: opium hasn’t changed; what have changed are our knowledge, our perception and our judgement of opium.

The drug still holds gruesome fascination – or, to quote Goethe, “half drawn by her he glided in, and was not seen again.” The exhibition provides an opportunity to legally indulge in the magic of opium.

The curator

The exhibition “Opium” was designed and realized by Dr Doris Buddenberg, guest curator at the Museum der Kulturen Basel. Buddenberg, who holds a PhD in anthropology and a degree in economics, worked for many years in international affairs with a focus on drug policies, among others, for the United Nations, in the course of which she gained profound experience and knowledge on the subject.

Publication

The exhibition is supported by a 200-page, richly illustrated publication (G/E) featuring thrilling contributions by renowned specialists and providing deeper insight into a wide range of topics around “Opium”.

Funding

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