



Pilgrimage – The Rediscovery of Slow Travel

On 14 September 2012 a new special exhibition opens at the Museum der Kulturen. It is called ‘Pilgrimage’ and deals with the rediscovery of slow travel. For centuries people have undertaken travels in the search of inner peace, reflection, and truth. The exhibition sheds light on the historical and cultural background of pilgrimages, not without addressing the ultimate question of the Why.

The exhibition ‘Pilgrimage’ addresses the rediscovery of slow travel. The reasons why people undertake these strenuous journeys are manifold, and not all are religiously motivated. What all pilgrimages have in common, however, is that they have to do with seeking or searching. The fact that pilgrimages have experienced a strong revival in recent years was reason enough for the curator of the European Department, Dominik Wunderlin, to stage a major exhibition on the subject: ‘The term pilgrimage automatically brings to mind the Way of St James to Santiago de Compostela. But people tend to forget that there are many similar routes that lead to other holy places. In fact, the exhibition goes to show that Europe is covered by pilgrim ways, like a spider’s web. Together they constitute a rich cultural heritage that deserves acknowledgment.’

Pilgrimage is in vogue

‘Pope travels to Fatima’, ‘Poles in Pilgrimage Frenzy’, ‘Hollywood Discovers the Way of St James’, ‘Lourdes Under the Spell of Miracles’ – headlines like this plaster the front pages of newspapers and magazines. Moreover, the label ‘pilgrimage’ has in the meantime found its way into travel agencies and, above all, bookshops, which boast shelves of illustrated books and travel guides on famous and lesser-known pilgrim routes. Ever more customers want to read about the pilgrimage experience. No wonder Hape Kerkeling’s book sold more than two million copies in three years. Nowadays, talking about pilgrimage draws attention, and people who have gone on an extensive pilgrimage tour become the object of admiration.

Many Roads to Rome

The exhibition features not only the Way of St James. The starting point is the Holy Land with Jerusalem, the first and primary destination in the history of European pilgrimage. In the course of time, many new holy places were added: Rome, Santiago de Compostela, and numerous national and local shrines like Einsiedeln and Mariastein in Switzerland now populate Europe’s sacred landscape. Visitors to the exhibition get to hear and see what motivated medieval pilgrims and how they fared on the way. But it also highlights the phenomenon of modern pilgrimage and what makes people of today undertake such arduous journeys. The stations in the exhibition deal with subjects like preparation and departure, patron saints, ancient customs, pilgrim badges, sacred sites and shrines, as well as the handicrafts and businesses that earn their money

through pilgrimage. Unlike pilgrimage in the past, the modern practice has very little to offer in terms of artefacts. This is why the exhibition's emphasis is on exhibits from the past. They take us into a world of belief that appears very strange to us today. The show presents pieces from the meticulously assembled collection of the museum's European department, including mysterious amulets for safe travel, little sacred images that used to be swallowed, baby caps made of silk used as protection against sickness in infancy, and many other curios. Apart from devotional objects brought back from famous pilgrimage sites like Jerusalem, Rome, or Einsiedeln, it also features a variety of votive offerings and impressive 'pictorial prayers to heaven'. Special focus is placed on the peculiar merging, then and now, of piety and deep spirituality with commercialism, consumerism, and kitsch. The show provides an impressive visual testimony to the cultural and historical background of the current rediscovery, even hype, of pilgrimage. The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated publication by the curator Dominik Wunderlin. The show is on until 3 March 2013.