

CHRISTMAS GIFTS – BLESSING OR BURDEN?

The exhibition “Christmas Gifts – Blessing or Burden?” ties in with the tradition at the Museum der Kulturen of staging a special exhibition during the Christmas season, for the fifteenth year running. The tradition has become an integral part of Christmas in Basel and complements the Christmas market being staged at the Münsterplatz for the second time this year. Subject of the exhibition are the historical and cultural backgrounds to the practice of gift giving at Christmas. On show are presents from bygone days as well as today.

The practice of gift giving at Christmas traces back to Saint Nicholas, who used to reward children for good behaviour with fruits, sweets, and small presents. The veneration of saints and their feast days met with opposition during the age of Reformation and gift giving was shifted from 6 December, Saint Nicholas Day, to Christmas. Hence, in the German-speaking world, Father Christmas was replaced by the *Christkindl* (Christ Child).

The age of industrialization and the growth of cities in Europe during the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of the bourgeois nuclear family, and Christmas became the ideal occasion to celebrate and strengthen family ties by underpinning them with a religiously inspired feast. Also in the nineteenth century the significance of childhood as an important and constitutive stage in life received growing attention, to the effect that the custom of giving gifts to children became a focus of Christmas celebrations, not least with educational and disciplinary considerations in mind. Under the impact of growing prosperity and increased secularism, the religious motives and manifestations of Christmas began to wane; today the event is above all a family celebration enjoyed by Christians and others alike.

The growing availability of cheap commodities from the mid-twentieth century on has led to an ever-stronger commercialization of Christmas. In the meantime, the Christmas season has become the prime selling season for most stores and shopping malls. Shopping is not only an expression of our spendthrift lifestyle, the Christmas spending spree also gives the economy a welcome boost each year. The feast celebrating the birth of Christ has been sacrificed on the altar of the consumerism and Father Christmas has transmuted from a benevolent bringer of gifts to a shrewd marketing expert. At the same time, his assortment of presents has adapted to the needs and expectations of our time.

The exhibition “Christmas Gifts – Blessing or Burden?” forges a bridge between Christmas past and Christmas present. With the help of numerous pictures and exhibits it illustrates the changing significance and value of the most important feast in the Christian calendar. The exhibition is divided into four parts: the first section deals with the cultural background and historical development of gift giving at Christmas; the second part relates to an ever-recurring dilemma at Christmas: “What shall I buy



for family and friends?" The third section addresses the issue of the erosion of the deeper meaning of Christmas, while the fourth part features a selection of personal Christmas presents and stories contributed by visitors to the exhibition.