

Press release

Secrecy – Who’s allowed to know what?

13 April 2018 to 21 April 2019

Secrecy draws a line between those in the know and those who are left in the dark. In this exhibition, the museum takes a look at some fascinating manifestations of secrecy.

In the show, blue is the colour of secrecy: the blue carpet muffles the sound of footsteps, and the exhibition’s sections in various shades of blue exude an air of calm. Windows in the partition walls offer tantalizing glimpses, but only when visitors enter the separate sections are their topics and exhibits revealed. Concealing and disguising are the themes of this exhibition.

Its design reveals how secrecy draws a line between the informed and the uninformed, between insiders and outsiders. The entrance is especially impressive: visitors pass beneath a gable figure from Papua New Guinea, something that in Iatmul society only initiates were permitted to do. Such figures were used to protect secret ritual objects in men’s houses. The exhibition’s curator Tabea Buri lifts the lid on a few secrets by providing access to delicate love letters and hidden drawers, once secret masks, and used ballot papers. In doing so, she turns visitors into initiates.

As important as the secret itself is the question of who is in on it: who’s allowed to know what, in other words. Those entrusted with confidential information often enjoy high social standing, but sometimes they get to feel that secrets are a burden. At an audio station, a priest, a therapist, a banker, a schoolgirl, and two call boys describe how they deal with the things people tell them in confidence.

Visitors to the exhibition also get to know other guardians of secret knowledge: the ritual experts of the Batak on Sumatra record their specialist knowledge using a secret code written on sheets of barkcloth for their books of spells. Healers in Panama derive their secret knowledge from carved tutelary figures. Here in Switzerland, three well-known cheesemakers from Appenzell keep the secret of their cheese to themselves. Recipes are confidential not least for commercial reasons – as stories about Murano glass or Chinese silk also show.

Telling someone a secret may bring a sense of relief, as “worry dolls” show, but because power is almost always an issue when secrets are involved, betrayal can have serious consequences. Think of the sampling bottles used in doping control, or ceramic “trees of life” in Central America: Adam and Eve broke the rules about who is permitted to know what when they tasted the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

Men’s and women’s societies also possess exclusive knowledge. Four examples from North America, Oceania, West Africa, and Europe show that the phrase “secret society” often falls short of the mark, however: besides their hidden rituals, these societies also had and have a public, visible side to them. Think of the impressive helmet masks used by the Sande women’s secret society in Sierra Leone and Liberia, or the dance paddles adorned with colourful feathers used by the Iniet society of the Gazelle Peninsula of Papua New Guinea.

The exhibition shows that secrets are kept everywhere: usually they are well hidden and safely guarded, but occasionally they are revealed, with social groups being established or redefined in the process. Some things remain shrouded in mystery – and outsiders to an extent remain excluded from them. Still, visitors to this exhibition have the chance to unburden themselves by sharing their secret with Till Lauer, an artist who plans to illustrate fifteen of the secrets shared with him during the exhibition.

Young visitors to the exhibition can look forward to something special: if they can track down seven secrets, they will get their hands on a secret code that allows them to break open a safe!

Publication

Secrecy



Secrecy is alluring. Early modern anthropology already showed great interest in secret knowledge and secret societies, and today, in the age of Wikileaks and the ongoing Internet privacy debate, the topic is still high on the list. The companion volume to the exhibition Secrecy looks at the issue from the perspective of social order. Secrecy creates boundaries between insiders and outsiders, between the informed and the uninformed. Access to secret knowledge means power, revealing it spells danger.

Contributions from current research in diverse fields uncover how secrecy comes into play in different cultural settings. The bank secrecy, the realm of personal privacy, the darknet, and shrouded sexual identities are just some of the topics addressed in the book. In-depth portraits of arcane objects from the collections of the Museum der Kulturen Basel reveal that secrets not only have a hidden but often also a visible, public dimension.

The richly illustrated volume (174 pages), published by Hatje Cantz Verlag, comes in two language versions, German and English, and is available at the museum shop.

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