

The good guys always triumph over the demons

With the exhibition “Bhima, Mr Punch, and the Demon”, the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) steps into the epic world of puppet theatre and casts a spotlight on the fascinating puppets and marionettes that bring it to life.

Amir Hamzah was the uncle of the prophet Mohammed. He helped his father defend the Kingdom of Arabia; together they went on to overcome many challenges during the diffusion of Islam.

The rod puppet is one of the main figures in the menak narratives. The story cycle that focuses on Amir Hamzah is part of the traditional Indonesian wayang theatre. The wayang kulit shadow play theatre is on the UNESCO World Heritage list. The figure was carved of wood in the Sentolo style by Widi Prayitno in 1974. It is part of the Gamper collection which was donated to MKB in 2017.

Curator Richard Kunz took the gift of roughly 2,500 objects as an occasion to plan for a major exhibition on puppet theatres. Puppetry is found across the world and cherished by young and old alike. On the island of Java, the wayang golek puppet theatre is extremely popular, and puppeteers often enjoy superstar status.

For the exhibition “Bhima, Mr Punch, and the Demon”, Richard Kunz was able to draw on the large collection of puppets and figures held by MKB. His selection fell on a host of beautiful rod and hand puppets, shadow play figures, and marionettes from Asia and Europe, many of from the Gamper collection.

As in puppetry in general, the focus of the exhibition is on story-telling, including hugely popular epics such as the ancient Indian Ramayana and Mahabharata – which feature the hero and prince, Bhima – along with the above-mentioned serat menak narratives from Indonesia, as well as the Chinese classic novel “Journey to the West”. With the help of the main figures, the exhibition enacts some of the key scenes from these epics. The strongly typified characters allow puppeteers not only to entertain their audiences but also to depict the world and society.

The Western European Punch and Judy theatre as well as the Turkish Karagöz theatre also build on recurring main characters. They, too, feature prominently in the exhibition. Jesters and demons – characters that are part of every puppet theatre – are given special attention. In the universal struggle between good and evil, the demons always lose out against the good. On the one hand, jesters take on the role of clown-like entertainers and servants, on the other, they embody critical voices who hold up a mirror to their audiences, like, for example, Toples from the wayang menak theatre. Widi Prayitno had him made specially for Werner Gamper in 1980.

The exhibition opens on 22 August at 18.30, and continues until 2 August 2020.

You find pictures of Amir Hamzah, Toples und Mr Punch on:

https://www.mkb.ch/de/informationen_services/mediendienste.html