

Memorable Moments

The exhibition “Memory – Moments of Remembering and Forgetting” (from 26 June 2020) at the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) sheds light on the manifold forms and practices by which individuals, groups as well as whole societies experience events, preserve them in memory, and retrieve them at specific moments.

The exhibition opens with personal memories; no matter whether in the form of autograph books, photo albums, souvenirs, or baptism records, they all recall memories of a memorable moment, a special place, or an important person. And, as the exhibition curator Alexander Brust points out, they go to show that memories are commonly associated with material objects. Thanks to our biographical memory, even mass-manufactured tourist souvenirs become unique and acquire emotional force.

The exhibition highlights not only personal moments commonly commemorated such as births, weddings, and death but also major events that affect societies as a whole such as natural disasters, wars, independence days, or the opening of a border. How things are remembered is key here: humans have recourse to a multitude practices, forms, and media to capture and pay tribute to memorable moments. Mind you, occasionally they also simply blank out such events.

Since humans are inclined to forget quickly, they often prefer to rely on the help of mnemonic devices. The second room features a wide selection of such memory supports. It includes knotted cords from Peru which the Inca used to record statistical and military data, thousand-year old rock paintings from Africa displaying animal motifs, as well as engraved bamboo tubes from New Caledonia on which the indigenous Kanak depicted everyday scenes as well as their struggles with the French colonizers.

In many cultures, ancestors continue to impact on the lives of the living. They are venerated in rituals and through sacrifices and brought to life in a multitude of shapes and forms for different purposes. In Indonesia, carved ancestor figures used to make up part of every household. On display are numerous ancestor figures and masks along with memorial heads of deceased rulers from the former Kingdom of Benin. The world-famous, 8th-century Tikal lintel is a key document for understanding Mayan society, history, and cosmology. On the map of Tecamachalco, we find indigenous and European concepts of territory, genealogy, and land ownership next to one another.

Monumental epics and sacred scripts ensure that individual as well as collective experiences and events are never forgotten. The exhibition features Bibles, Tora, Quran, sacred healing scrolls from Ethiopia, as well as Batak medicinal manuscripts from Indonesia. The Ramayana epic from India is presented in a modern, illustrated version designed by the artist Sugandha Iyer.

In the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1980s, sections of the wider population appropriated media for the purpose of recording their own version of history, previously a privilege of the ruling elite class, with regard to issues such as decolonization, the end of the Cold War, apartheid in South Africa, or the rule of South American dictators. On fabrics, paintings, and posters, actors from different social strata inscribed their own national narratives and memorial days or vented their critique of dictators and the misuse of state power.

The exhibition ends in memory of the dead; this is a common duty in Europe. Exhibits such as hair art, funeral planks, and grave crosses serve to commemorate the deceased. In Mexico, the reunion with the deceased is joyfully celebrated on Día de los Muertos whereas, in Peru, the Matsigenka people create guardian figures to protect them from the dead.