

BIG – Things Interpretations Dimensions

We live in an age of superlatives: XXL-stores, mega-cities, multinational corporations, skyscrapers and terabytes are expressions of seemingly unlimited growth and aspirations of power. The omnipresence of supersize things in modern everyday life tends to obscure the fact that humans have ever been fascinated by size.

Big things look impressive, powerful, awe inspiring, even frightening at times. In order to appreciate and compare size, we define things in physical terms, using figures and other fixed units of measurement. But there are further dimensions to size: In the show “BIG Things Interpretations Dimensions” we go in search of these other aspects, gauging the cultural dimensions of size across fourteen exhibition spaces.

Fascination of Size

Big things have a breath-taking appeal. This also applies to the ceremonial houses of the Abelam people of Papua New Guinea. Majestically these architectural icons tower above the jungle’s green canopy. Long before the customized ceremonial house was erected in the museum in 1981, an older, painted cult house façade – dismantled into six parts – found its way into our collections. But it was simply too big to exhibit in its full splendour.

Model of an Abelam ceremonial house

This model was built on a scale of 1:50 after a real ceremonial house. It was used in the field to discuss with interlocutors questions of construction in connection with the museum’s ceremonial house. The model served as a blueprint for the construction of the ceremonial house in the Museum der Kulturen Basel.

- 1 H 44 cm; wood, cord; Kalabu, Maprik area, Papua New Guinea; around 1979; Collection Brigitta and Jörg Hauser-Schäublin, Vb 28542

Ceremonial house façade

These parts from the front of a ceremonial house were purchased already in the 1960s. Due to its size the façade had to be dismantled into six parts. The depiction of the huge ancestral faces reflects the cosmological worldview of the Abelam in which the ancestors also play an important part in everyday life.

- 2 H 365 cm; sago spathe, pigment, bast fibre; Koimbe/Kuminibus, Maprik area, Papua New Guinea; Collection Franz Panzenböck, before 1965; Vb 22173b03
- 3 H 330 cm; sago spathe, pigment, bast fibre; Koimbe/Kuminibus, Maprik area, Papua New Guinea; Collection Franz Panzenböck, before 1965; Vb 22173b05

Impressions of ceremonial houses in the Maprik area, Papua New Guinea

- 4 Film clips: digital copies of negative films, 16 mm; fot_0709 René Gardi; Photographs: digital copies of slides, 6 x 6 cm; fot_0709 René Gardi and digital copies of slides, 24 x 36 cm; fot_0425 Alfred Bühler; Expedition 1955/56, length: 13:41 min

Norm size

Size is relative and has always to be seen in comparison. Common units with fixed dimensions include such things as DIN formats, shipping containers and ISO standards. Norms are cultural guidelines as to how we gauge and value things.

While we normally use a ruler to measure out things, people in Papua New Guinea assess the size of a pig by determining the size of its belly with the help of a strip of cane. In Bali a hole in a wooden board, which serves to take measure of a chicken ready to be sacrificed in the temple, specifies the norm.

Japanese counting frame soroban

The Japanese abacus was based on the Chinese suanpan that was introduced to Japan in the 14th century. If you know how to use it, the soroban is about just as good and fast as a pocket calculator. In primary school pupils learn with the soroban, not least because it visualizes the decimal system and is a good exercise for mental maths.

5 L 17 cm; bamboo, plastic; Tokyo, Japan; 1992; Collection Gerhard Baer; IId 11913

Ruler

This ruler was used to draw straight lines. Unlike modern rulers, it had no scale and its length was not standardized.

6 L 44 cm; wood, pigment, glass beads, mother-of-pearl; Romania; around 1930; Collection Elisabeth Dübendorfer; VI 61886

Hat gauge

This clever measuring device comes from a milliner's workshop. By moving the wooden shanks, you can determine the size of a hat, which is usually recorded on the sweatband. The device relies on two scales, 1 to 8 and 49 to 62, and is therefore applicable to just about all hat sizes, from that of a small child to that of a slightly above-average-sized man.

7 L 22 cm; wood, brass; Basel, Switzerland; around 1900; Collection Gertrud Riggenschach; VI 16450

Measure Swiss cubit

When the metric system was introduced to twelve Swiss cantons in 1838, special measuring sticks helped the people to become accustomed with the new unit of measurement. The cantonal coats of arms served as official references to the changeover. As a concession to the previous system, the authorities temporarily introduced the "Swiss cubit" measuring exactly 60 cm in length, as the people were not yet accustomed to using the new metre stick.

8 L 73 cm; wood; Basel, Switzerland; 1838; Collection A. Gönner; VI 15926

Measure, Basel cubit

Up to the introduction of the decimal system in the 19th century, triangular wooden sticks were used for measuring cloth in the Basel area. The cubit is a measure based on the length of the forearm from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger. In and around Basel, standardized cubits were often given to young girls and women as a present. They were individually decorated and had the woman's name and the corresponding year inscribed on the wood.

9 L 55 cm; wood, pewter; Gelterkinden, Basel-Landschaft, Switzerland; 1794; Leopold Rüttimeyer; VI 11141

Measuring device at the turn to the metric system

The common folding ruler today usually indicates the measures in both centimetres and inches. When the metric system was finally introduced in Switzerland at the end of the 19th century, three scales were shown: traditional inches, Swiss feet and the newly introduced metric centimetres. Switzerland's signing of the Paris Metre Convention meant an important step in facilitating international trade.

10 L 100 cm; wood, brass; Wynau, Bern, Switzerland; around 1880; Collection Strebel; VI20496

Rosary

The chain consisting of 59 beads, each one referring to a specific prayer and a crucifix serves as mnemonic device when praying the rosary. Material and design may vary, but otherwise the practice of praying the rosary hasn't changed since the late middle Ages. The rosary could also be described as a repetitive training in meditation.

11 L 38 cm; silver alloy; Schwäbisch-Gmünd, Baden-Württemberg, Germany; around 1960; Collection Emanuel Grossmann; VI 32048

Oil drop counter

This simple device allows a producer or merchant to control the discharge of oil with the aid of a tap. The drop is an inaccurate but widespread unit of measurement for small quantities of liquid. The only way to regulate the volume is by means of the exit valve's diameter and the fluid's consistency.

12 H 11 cm; sheet metal, cast iron; Basel, Switzerland; around 1900; Collection Karl Pfrommer; VI 32209

Prayer cord mas'baha

Muslims rely on prayer cords with 99 beads. If a cord only has 11 or 33 beads, one has to go through the corresponding number of repeats. The cord is used to recite Allah's 99 names or to repeat three different doxologies after each of the five daily prayers towards Mecca.

13 D 25 cm; glass beads, cord; Iran; before 1990; Collection Sophie Grigorian-Müller; IIe 2800

Book, conversion tables from the old Lucerne measures and weights to the standard Swiss system

The mathematics teacher J. Ineichen of the Lucerne Lyceum explains in this book the advantages of the new system introduced by twelve Swiss cantons in 1838. It was based on the metric system but still relied on the old measures and weights. Insofar it was only an intermediate step on the long journey to the international standard metre.

14 L 18 cm; cardboard, paper; Lucerne, Switzerland; 1837; Collection Georg Staffelbach; VI 35823

Gauge for chicken sacrifices

In Bali chickens are important sacrificial animals. However, they have to measure a certain minimum size. If the chicken passes through the hole in the board, it is not yet ready for sacrifice in a temple.

15 H 26 cm, hole diameter 5 cm; wood, plant fibre; Ipah village, Bali, Indonesia; before 1973; Donation Kelian Adat; IIc 17079

Prayer chain mâlâ

Buddhist prayer chains consist of 27 or 4 x 27, that is, 108 beads. They serve to keep count on the number of prayers or prostrations. The figure 108 is explained in different ways: some say one actually counts 100 prayers, while the remaining eight compensate for counting errors; others say the surplus eight are dedicated to all sentient beings.

16 D 20 cm; bone, shell, brass, cotton; Tibet; mid-20th c.; Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen; IId 14349

Counting stick amango

The midribs are tied into a bundle and used to keep check on the correct sequence of songs during a ritual. For each song, a midrib is removed from the bundle and laid aside. Bundles consisting of more than 470 ribs have been recorded.

17 L 25 cm; midrib of sago-palm leaf; Sawos, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1981; Collection Markus Schindelbeck; Vb 28910

Chinese counting board suanpan

With the help of the Chinese counting board you can do calculations according to the decimal as well as the hexadecimal system, that is, on the basis of 10 or 16, including addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division as well as square-root calculations. The system is based on four plus one beads and probably derives from the five-finger counting method.

18 L 39 cm; wood, metal; China; around 1900; Collection Samuel Preiswerk-Sarasin; IId 702

Pig gauge yigel

With the help of this device the Abelam people of Papua New Guinea record the size of a pig by taking measure of its girth and the length of its back. In the context of the construction of a ceremonial house, pigs are ritually exchanged, sacrificed and consumed. The yigel is used to indicate the size of a pig and thus the generosity of its donor.

19 L 250 cm; cane, plant fibre; Abelam, Baynik, Prince Alexander Range, Papua New Guinea; before 1966; Collection Gisela und Meinhard Schuster; Vb 26789a and Vb 26789b

Pig gauge mbale-igel

The Abelam people of Papua New Guinea record the size of pigs by measuring the girth of their bellies with the help of special gauges. Pigs have special ritual significance there. The gauge is kept as evidence to mark the sizes of the pigs given to one's exchange partner.

20 D 45 cm; cane, plant fibre; Abelam, Kalabu, Prince Alexander Range, Papua New Guinea; before 1980; Collection Brigitta and Jörg Hauser-Schäublin; Vb 28613

Yam gauge wapi-igel

The Abelam people of Papua New Guinea rely in strips of cane to measure the diameter of yam tubers. For the Abelam, yam is not only a staple food but also an essential part of the ritual exchange system. The gauge is kept as evidence to mark the sizes of the yam tubers given to one's exchange partner.

21 D 23 cm; cane, plant fibre; Abelam, Kalabu, Prince Alexander Range, Papua New Guinea; before 1980; Collection Brigitta and Jörg Hauser-Schäublin; Vb 28616

Counting leaf

In Vanuatu leaves are often used for counting. For instance, people would count days by plucking a leaf each day. Felix Speiser reported that the people of Vanuatu were very good at

- counting and that their counting system went well beyond the mark of one thousand.
22 L 86 cm; Palm leaf; Island of Malakula, Vanuatu; before 1912; Collection Felix Speiser-Merian; Vb 4130

Awkwardly big

Not only creating big things is a challenge, the same is true of collecting, shipping, storing and exhibiting large objects in museums. Logistic considerations often demand that large objects are taken or sawn apart, sometimes in the field or else upon arrival in the museum. Some objects are so big they require a special storage space. Owing to structural constraints, not all our large objects can be exhibited in the museum's galleries.

Dance figure, fish

This plaited fish figure was worn by a dancer who entered it through a small opening. Among other occasions, the mask performed on « 14 juillet », the French national day, which is also celebrated in Tahiti. The collectors Theo Meier and Lucas Staehlin purchased this figure in 1932 and had it shipped to Basel.

- 23 L 450 cm; Pandanus fibre; Papeete, Tahiti, French Polynesia; before 1933; Collection Theo Meier and Lucas Staehlin von Mandach; Vc 710

Canoe Jiaie

In the 1970s this type of canoe was still a common and popular means of transport in the Columbian rainforest. As a museum object it was definitely more awkward to handle, due to its size and protruding parts. Its stern and bow were damaged and its keel broken off, probably during shipment to Europe.

- 24 L 431 cm; wood, resin; Witoto, Columbia; ca. 1969; built by Porfirio Kuiru, Collection Jürg Gasché; IVc 17103

Grain basket

The round wickerwork vessel has four handles. Filled with grain it was lifted into the air by four strong hands and shaken so that the grain dust clinging to the granules would drop to the ground. The basket was not used for transport purposes, for one thing because it was too heavy, for another because it was too big to pass through a normal door.

- 25 D 105 cm; wood, wickerwork; Wasen i. E., Bern, Switzerland; around 1900; Collection J. Lanz-Ruchti; VI 16984

Dance shield

During the performance of dema rituals among the Marind-anim of southern Papua, this type of shield was worn on the back, transforming the dancer into a primeval mythical being. For many years the shield was loaned to the Basel University Hospital where it was exhibited in the entrance hall. Structural changes made to the building during the period of loan made it almost impossible to get the object out again, requiring high precision work and much effort.

- 26 L 325 cm; wood, pigment; Marind-anim, south coast, Papua, Indonesia; before 1920; Donation Paul Wirz; Vb 5535

Sago storage vessel

Sago, the starch extracted from the pith of the sago palm, is the staple diet along the Sepik River. It is stored in clay pots. The pots are traded and also popular collector items, not least

because they often reach the limits of technical feasibility. The women of Aibom sell their pots to villages on the Middle Sepik. Sago is processed and eaten as a type of gruel, in pudding form or as a kind of flatbread.

27 D 70 cm; clay, pigment; Aibom village, Chambri Lake, Middle Sepik, Papua New Guinea; before 1964; Collection Franz Panzenböck; Vb 21946

Ceremonial spear

This intricately decorated spear was probably made by Tiwi people in northern Australia for an initiation ritual. To facilitate shipping the spear was sawn in half, something one would certainly not do today.

28 L 227 cm; wood, pigment; Tiwi, Melville Islands, Northern Australia; before 1931; Collection Eduard Handschin; Va 431

Shield

Iwam shields were highly sought-after by art dealers. The interest in the shields kept alive the traditional patterns, but induced the Iwam to create ever-larger copies, making them useless for the traditional style of fighting.

29 L 263 cm; wood, pigment, plant fibre; Upper Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1966; Collection Gisela and Meinhard Schuster, Vb 22949

Moving oversize objects

30 Length of film 25 min.; by Thomas Maier; Transport of the oversize objects from the storage depots to the exhibition spaces; © MKB; produced by Thomas Maier Digital Media, Production & Consulting. The film project was gratefully supported by the Werenfels- Fonds

Great lightness

We tend to associate size with stability, weight and solidity. Big things are usually made of weighty materials such as stone or massive tree trunks. Accordingly, they are worked with heavy tools such as axes, saws, hammers and chisels, making the objects gradually diminish in size and weight. Textiles are quite different in this sense. Their size often belies their lightness. They also differ in the way they are made. Instead of diminishing, they grow from small and light components to a large size, usually through the hands of women.

Barkcloth launima

In many parts of Polynesia and Melanesia, barkcloths are commonly produced by women. They are made from the inner bark fibre of the mulberry tree. By consistent beating the material not only grows thinner but also in size. The precious fabrics were used for making clothes, as burial shrouds and as wrappings for prestigious gifts; in addition they served as emblems of high rank and status.

31 L 2860 cm; barkcloth, pigment; Nuku-Alofa, Tongatapu, Tonga, Polynesia; before 1992; Donation Ingrid Schneider-Helmert; Vc 1638

Mask vung-vung

This mask, worn by a man on his head, performed during the nocturnal fire dances. The masker was not permitted to jump through the fire. Among the Uramot, gender division is marked by the use of different paints: red stands for male attributes, black for female qualities.

- 32 L 412 cm; barkcloth, wood, bamboo, vine, leaf, pigment; Uramot Baining, Gaulim, Gazelle Peninsula, New Britain, Papua New Guinea; before 1989; Donation Volker Schneider; Vb 30229

Mask vung-vung

Protruding from the mouth of this mask is a bamboo tube wrapped in barkcloth, which the masker uses to utter trumpet-like sounds during a dance.

As a counterweight the mask is equipped with wooden rod, which is said to represent a tail.

- 33 L 110 cm, barkcloth, bamboo, vine, feathers, string; Baining, Gazelle Peninsula, New Britain, Papua New Guinea; before 1914; exchange with Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg; Vb 296

Mask hareigha

This comparatively small ancestral mask, which was worn by a dancer, formed the top of a construction that could reach a height of up to twelve metres. The conical “body” (not exhibited) was supported by men using long bamboo props. The mask was made of barkcloth and therefore quite light, even allowing the dancer to perform dance steps.

- 34 H 155 cm; barkcloth, bamboo, vine, leaf; Chachat-Baining, Gazelle Peninsula, New Britain, Papua New Guinea; before 1926; Collection Julius August Konietzko; Vb 6543

Mask churukchruk

The mask symbolizes fertility and stands for the realm of the food gardens, the domain of women.

The masks' lower part depicted a variety of birds, the oblong upper part adorned with floral motifs shows a coconut palm.

- 35 L 245 cm; bark fibre, pigment, bamboo, vines, leaf; Uramot Baining; Gazelle Peninsula, New Britain, Papua New Guinea; before 1914; Collection Hiltrup Sacred Heart Missionaries; acquisition; Vb 28021

Big – bigger – the biggest

Striving for bigness seems to be something innately human: away from the average, towards the superlative appears to be the motto. Big things are impressive and awe inspiring, making us gasp and feel quite small at times, but also a feature of bragging, rivalry and competition. Exploring new technologies and relying on joint cooperation, people succeed in raising towering poles, mighty house posts and huge ceremonial figures, forcing us to throw back our heads to look up at them.

Mask madaska namenggaza

This tall mask is modelled on a growing tree. The red pigment stands for female fertility and the growth of the embryo in the mother's belly. Growth is dependent on nourishment; in this sense the mask is a reference to the people's dependence on the growth of crops.

- 36 H 377 cm; bark fibre, wood, cane, pigment; Uramot Baining, Gaulim, Gazelle Peninsula, New Britain, Papua New Guinea; before 1989; Collection Volker Schneider; Vb 30228

Ancestral figure

This carved figure is Janus-faced but only has arms and legs on one side. The statue represents a deceased big man of earlier days.

- 37 H 240 cm; tree fern; island of Ambrym, Vanuatu; before 1912; Donation Felix Speiser-Merian; Vb 4362

Grade figure

This carved figure represents a woman. It was believed to have protective powers and was created in memory of a high-ranking woman.

- 38 H 265 cm; tree fern; island of Gaua, Banks Islands, Vanuatu; before 1912; Donation Felix Speiser-Merian; Vb 4374

To create a grade figure, the men take the rootstock of a young tree fern for the upper and use the stem for the lower part of the body. This figure has two faces, one on top of the other, which indicates that the man commissioning the carving was of high rank.

- 39 H 270 cm; tree fern; island of Ambrym, Vanuatu; before 1912; Donation Felix Speiser-Merian; Vb 4364

A fern statue indicated the grade a man had reached. They were created in honour of living or deceased high-ranking members of the male grade-taking society *sukwe*. The *sukwe* society was a principal institution that lent men orientation and guidance.

- 40 H 190 cm; tree fern; island of Ambrym, Vanuatu; before 1912; Donation Felix Speiser-Merian; Vb 4510

The *sukwe* was a strictly graded, secret male society. By making prestations a man could rise in rank. In Ambrym there were ten grades. Only men of highest rank were honoured with a fern figure.

- 41 H 226 cm; tree fern; Wuro, island of Ambrym, Vanuatu; before 1983; Collection Christian Kaufmann; Vb 29402a

House posts

The house posts supported the floor and roof constructions of the ceremonial men's houses. The richly carved roof supports were the tallest posts. Due to frequent flooding during the rainy season, most houses along the Sepik were built on stilts. Thus the posts were pivotal, both in an architectural and a mythical sense. They usually carried names and were associated with specific clan ancestors. In the myth of the first ceremonial men's house it is recounted that the house was built under water and served as a residence to various ancestral and other spirit beings. As far as spirits and ancestors are concerned, water still plays a key role in the people's belief, as indicated by the wavelike ornaments on some of the posts.

- 42 H 312 cm; wood; Kingau, hinterland of Timbunke, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1962; Collection Franz Panzenböck; Vb 25362

- 43 H 330 cm; wood; Kingau, hinterland of Timbunke, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1962; Collection Franz Panzenböck; Vb 19618

- 44 H 344 cm; Kingau, hinterland of Timbunke, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1962; Collection Franz Panzenböck; Vb 25880

- 49 H 412 cm; wood, cone shell; Kreimbit, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1959; Collection Alfred Bühler; Vb 22076

- 54 H 660 cm; wood; Kingau, hinterland of Timbunke, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1962; Collection Franz Panzenböck; Vb 19615

- 55 H 705 cm; wood; Kingau, hinterland of Timbunke, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1962; Collection Franz Panzenböck; Vb 19613

- 56 H 658 cm; wood; Kingai, hinterland of Timbunke, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1962; Collection Franz Panzenböck; Vb 19616

Post of the men's house kàtkatkoár

Together with its counterpart this post formed part of a pair in the ceremonial men's house of Aibom village. They supported one of the house's two roof girders. Originally the posts were longer by about half a length, but for shipping they had to be sawn off at ground level.

- 45 H 375 cm; wood; Iatmul, Aibom, Kumalio River, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1965; Collection Meinhard Schuster; Vb 23584
- 50 H 385 cm; wood; Iatmul, Aibom, Kumalio River, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1965; Collection Meinhard Schuster; Vb 23585

Dance ornament

This Baining dance ornament from New Britain consists of a head with an upper and a lower jaw, resembling a snake. It is formed of a vine framework and attached to a staff decorated with ornamental patterns. It forms part of a larger assemblage, but it remains unclear how the head was originally attached to the cylindrical or sticklike body underneath.

- 46 L 270 cm; bark fibre, pigment, bamboo, vine; Uramot Baining; Gazelle Peninsula, New Britain, Papua New Guinea; before 1914; Collection Hilstrup Sacred Heart Mission; acquisition; Vb 28015

Carved ceremonial crocodiles

The carved crocodiles from the Karawari River represent pivotal beings in the local totemic clan system. They always appear in pairs and stand in a mythological kin relationship with the people. In their role as powerful spirit beings they support the men at war and on hunts. They feature human as well as animal traits.

- 47, 48 L 710 cm and 723 cm; wood; Konmei and Mansamei, Karawari River, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1959; Collection Alfred Bühler; Vb 22093, Vb 22078

Bis poles

The Asmat decorate the poles with ancestral emblems and headhunting symbols. They are made of hardwood found in the mangrove forest and placed upside down with the roots facing upwards. The position symbolizes the intermediate world where the souls of recently deceased people reside.

- 51 H 598 cm; wood; Asmat, Papua, Indonesia; before 1967; Exchange with Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde Leiden; Vb 25277

According to Asmat belief, the first human being was carved from wood. The Asmat are excellent carvers. After carving, the bis poles, which can reach a height of up to eight metres, are daubed in lime. The colour white stands for the realm of the dead.

- 52 H 521 cm; wood, lime, fibre string; Asmat, Digul River, Papua, Indonesia; before 1963; Collection W. A. Dogtorom; Vb 19026

Shortly before the bis festival, the poles are decorated and positioned in the village. The souls of the dead are summoned to leave the intermediate world and join in the ancestors in the beyond. Later, the poles are destroyed.

- 53 H 375 cm; wood; Asmat, Eilanden River, Papua, Indonesia; before 1923; Donation Paul Wirz; Vb 6316e

Measuring size

The original aim of anthropometry was to deduce the laws of human development through measuring proportional ratios. However, drawing conclusions as to the distinctive characteristics of different peoples by measuring different parts of the body, especially the skull, proved not only difficult, but fallacious. However, body measurements still play an important role today, not only in matters like child growth standards, body mass index, clothing sizes, etc. but also when it comes to choosing the right partner and, of course, in the beauty industry.

- 55.2 % of the Swiss population are of normal weight
- In Switzerland, around 5,000 women undergo breast enlargement surgery every year
- The average Swiss man is 178 cm tall, the average woman 165 cm, and thus 13 cm smaller
- The ideal height ratio between a woman and a man is 1:1.09
- The brain of mathematician Friedrich Gauss weighed 1,492 grams
- Copernicus had an IQ of 100
- In a perfect face, the golden ratio 1:1.618 can be measured more than once
- The brain of a newborn baby girl weighs approximately 360 grams, that of a baby boy roughly 380 grams
- 90-60-90 are the ideal measurements for a woman
- In Switzerland a person killed in a road accident is valued at 2.94 million francs
- A single human cell contains two metres of DNA

Creating big things together

Big things usually demand high performance. They require the collaboration and coordination of multiple agents or groups of people equipped with different skills and different types of knowledge. Competition is an incentive to perform better than others – higher, bigger, greater. The social dynamics involved becomes manifest not only in spectacular ceremonial houses, grand temples or impressive canoes, it also creates the collective feeling of having achieved something of great and lasting impact.

Kanu belong Keram

57 Length of film: 16:26 minutes; film by Daniel von Rüdiger; produced by Elisabeth Cox; Kambot, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea; shot in 2014; © Daniel Rüdiger, 2016

Alpha

As far as social hierarchy is concerned, big men usually take the lead. Not necessarily as regards physical size, but in terms of status. Irrespective of whether their status is ascribed or acquired, big men generally stand at the top of the social ladder.

They usually own prestigious things that symbolize their standing, either because they are made of rare or valuable materials, because they are difficult to make, or because they are associated with the realm of the divine. In any case, they serve as indicators of social standing and power.

Ibrahim Njoya

The angle from which this photograph was taken underlines the status of the *fon*, the political and religious ruler. Njoya ruled over the Kingdom of Bamum in Cameroon from 1894 to 1933. He not only promoted the arts and culture, he was also a very clever diplomat when it came to dealing with colonial representatives, granting him renown even in Europe.

59 Digital copy from a silver gelatine dry plate, 9 x 12; Bamum, Fumban, Cameroon; 1912– 1915; photo by Anna Rein-Wuhrmann; (F)III4984

Door to a tomb

Among the Toraja of Sulawesi, families of high rank bury their dead in rock tombs. This tomb door shows in high relief the head of a buffalo. Among the Toraja people, buffaloes represent the most prestigious form of wealth.

60 H 75 cm; wood; Toraja, Sulawesi, Indonesia; early 20th c.; Collection August Flick; IIc 21420

Counting stick

Counting sticks were used in the context of bride wealth payments and other transactions. The number of sticks sticking in the board was a sign of how successful a man had been. According to Alfred Bühler, this stick indicated how many women the owner had slept with.

61 L 148 cm; midrib of palm leaf, bast fibre; Alukugg, Manus, Admiralty Islands, Papua New Guinea; before 1930; Collection Alfred Bühler; Vb 10354

Feather money

This coil of feather money is made of between fifty and sixty thousand sunbird feathers. Until the second half of the 20th century, feather money still formed part of a complex currency and trading system. It was a highly valued prestige object and used for larger transactions and in bride wealth exchanges.

62 L 900 cm; Sunbird feathers, pigeon feathers, bark fibre string, sea shell; Ndende, Santa- Cruz Islands, Solomon Islands; before 1989; Collection Volker Schneider; Vb 29956

Belt

Among the Waurá people of Brazil, belts like this were worn by high male dignitaries at important events. The jaguar ranks among South America's most powerful predators. Items made of jaguar skin indicate high social status and political power.

63 L 70 cm, jaguar skin, cotton; Waurá, Piyulagá, Upper Xingu, Mato Grosso, Brazil, before 1964, Collection Harald Schultz; IVc 11442

Distinction for successful kangaroo hunter

Kangaroo meat was an important source of protein among indigenous peoples of Australia. The animals were hunted by spear and boomerang. Successful hunters enjoyed high esteem in their community.

64 L 10 cm; resin, sinew, kangaroo hair; Northwest Australia; before 1925; Collection Emile Louis Bruno Clement; Va 315

Warrior's ceremonial shield

Successful warriors enjoyed high esteem among all Naga groups. They underlined their high status by displaying special adornments at feasts and ceremonies. The shield's ornaments—stylized heads of humans, human hair, tiger skin, bear skin – indicate that its owner was a successful and veteran warrior.

- 65 H 160 cm; bamboo, rattan, tiger skin, bear skin, beetle wings, Job's tears, feathers (chicken, pheasant, kingfisher, peacock), goat's hair, pigment, human hair, cotton, buffalo skin; Angami-Naga, Kohima Village, Nagaland, India; before 1937; Collection Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann; IIb 1326

Medal of merit from the Italian crown

This medal, which distinguished a person as a knight of the Italian crown, was commissioned by King Victor Emmanuel II in 1868 in honour of notable services rendered to the Italian nation. Knighthood lent a man high social status and prestige.

- 66 L 6 cm; Metal, enamel, gold, silk; Italy; before 1903; bearer and previous owner Julius Wilhelm of Lörrach; on loan from Dreiländermuseum Lörrach

Turban cloth pagri

In northern India men wear different types of turbans. The turban is an emblem of honour and respect. Owing to its size, putting on the *pagri* each morning is quite an effort. The cloths measure around ten metres in length, some even well over twenty metres.

- 67 L 1150 cm; cotton, pigments, gold powder; Rajasthan, northern India; before 1976; Donation Alfred Bühler; IIa 6629

Casting a long shadow

Playing on the illusion of shadows looks back on a long tradition. Using a single source a light, the outlines of a figure can be extended, stretched and distorted at will. Thus, in the famous Indian epic Ramayana the demon Kumbhakarna is made to look enormous, with his shadow enhancing his terrifying features.

But it's not only about the silhouette being an unlit space, it's about the shadow stimulating our sense of imagination.

Kumbhakarna as a shadow-play figure

In the famous Indian epic Ramayana, the giant Kumbhakarna is the brother of the demon king Ravana. Despite his size, terrifying features and voraciousness, he is in fact a gentle and devout being. Along with the Mahabharata, the Ramayana is one of the most important and comprehensive works of Indian literature. During the nightly performances the figures' moving shadows accentuate the drama of the story being told.

- 68 L 139 cm; buffalo skin, wood, pigment; Andhra Pradesh, southern India; before 1964; Collection Koduru Ramamurthi; IIa 3175

Monstrously large

Big things not only invoke fear, terror and dread but also awe, respect and admiration. How does one enact immensity? Especially in transitional phases such as initiation rituals, huge things often play an important part. Oversized devouring monsters or gigantic masks confront us with our own emotions, questioning the validity of our conventional standards and beliefs.

Gable masks, ceremonial men's houses

The large mask displayed on the gable of a men's house lent the house a face and personality. The size of a mask depended on the size of the house, not on the physical dimensions of a potential wearer. The extensions increased the mask's visual impact on the viewer.

69 L 89 cm; wood, nassa and cowrie shells, hair, cane; Middle Sepik, Papua New Guinea; before 1962; Collection Alfred Bühler; Vb 17284

73 L 125 cm; wood, cane, sheath of leaf, feather, fibre; Torembi, Middle Sepik, Papua New Guinea; before 1962; Collection Alfred Bühler; Vb 17294

Mask

This face mask was carved from a single piece of wood. It was attached to a wooden frame (not part of the museum collection) and could thus be moved and manipulated. The shells, boar's tusks and beads lent the mask a powerful expression.

70 L 80 cm; wood, clay, fibres, hair, cone, cowrie and nassa shells, boar's tusks, European beads; Kanduanum, Yuat River, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1956; Collection Alfred Bühler; Vb 14709

Ancestral mask waken-ndama

This mask was attached to the long side of a men's house, under the roof. From there the small face with its large eyes watched over the men. The Sawos regarded the mask as an embodied ancestor endowed with special powers.

71 L 112 cm; wood, pigment, natural fibre, coconut; Sawos; Middle Sepik, Papua New Guinea; something before 1973; Collection Christian Kaufmann; Vb 27840

Mask from a ceremonial men's house

The mask has two faces: one represents a male figure with a bird's head; the other appears upon turning the mask upside down. In times of war, the larger, human face, with the bird's head facing upwards, was placed in the men's house.

72 L 150 cm; wood, pigment; Suagab, April River, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1962; Collection Franz Panzenböck; Vb 21767

Double mask, ceremonial men's house

The Janus-faced representation of a head is formed of a vine structure covered by strips of coconut fibre. The rows of teeth and the tongue are made of sago-palm midribs, as are the ear ornaments. The two-faced mask was kept in a men's house.

74 L 181 cm; coconut fibre, pigment, midrib of sago-palm leaf, palm-pith bead; Iatmul; Sepik region, Papua New Guinea; before 1967; Collection Gallery Stephen Kellner, Australia; Vb 25265

Gable masks, ceremonial men's houses

75 L 162 cm; wood; Kabriman, Blackwater River, Middle Sepik, Papua New Guinea; before 1954; Collection Paul Wirz; Vb 2897

76 L 115 cm; wood; Torembi, Middle Sepik, Papua New Guinea; before 1962; Collection Alfred Bühler; Vb 17438

77 L 112 cm; wood; Iatmul, Tambunum; Middle Sepik, Papua New Guinea; before 1930; Collection Felix Speiser-Merian; Vb 8888

78 L 93 cm; wood, pigment; Middle Sepik, Papua New Guinea; probably before 1914; Collection Arthur Speyer Ethnografika-Handel; Bequest Elsa Eckert-Voegelin; Vb 31036

Ceremonial figure

The devouring monster *kaia imunu* played a key role in elaborate initiation ceremonies. When not in use, the terrifying being was stored in the rearmost corner of the ceremonial house. In the days of headhunting it was fed with the heads and limbs of slain enemies.

79 L 330 cm; cane, coconut fibre, cassowary feather, bamboo, wood; Namau, Purari River, Papua New Guinea; before 1931; Collection Paul Wirz; Vb 8070

On the giant's shoulders

Giants often play a prominent role in legends and fairytales. Although humanlike, they follow rules of their own. In their capacity as huge and powerful creatures, albeit usually benevolent in nature, they represent the antithesis of us human beings. In stories, giants often feature in transitional moments, when the new clashes with the old. In mythology, these primordial beings often stand at the beginning of creation, when the world is yet void of humans. They help to shape the landscape; in many cases caves, valleys and mountains are ascribed to the doings of giants.

Riese-Riese-Geschichte

80 Length of audio play: 36.23 min. Stories from the Mountains of Glarus by Dan Wiener. Adaptation into Glarus dialect by Peter Fischli. With Reto Stalder (narrator/Martin), Monique Courvoisier (grandmother), Peter Fischli (giant Martin). Music: Xenia Wiener. Sound: Basil Kneubühler. Director: Päivi Stalder; a SRF Production, 2015

Big data

The term big data is used to describe the immense growth of data in the digital age, a quantity of data that goes far beyond our imagination. On the one hand, big data is described as a gold mine that offers new opportunities for social and scientific advancement, on the other, it is seen, due to the lack of transparency, as a dangerous threat to our privacy and personal integrity. The hype certainly shows one thing: immensity is without boundaries, unlike our ability to fully grasp it.

Airport Lounge

81 "Airport Lounge" takes you on a continuous journey from airport lounge to airport lounge, to the rhythm of the posts that users of such lounges send to Instagram. An online project by Marc Lee; unique video of a five-hour uncut screen recording; in cooperation with the House of Electronic Arts Basel (HeK).

Gauging infinity

Many questions concerning creation, being, death, the nature of divinity, or the expanse of the universe are associated with bigness. In these contexts magnitude is regarded as so sublime that it dwarves everything we are familiar with. Nevertheless, human beings try to

lend infinity a graspable dimension and create objects that reflect the vastness that actually lies beyond our measure.

Lattice window mashrabīya

Decorative wood, stone or marble lattices are important elements in Islamic architecture. The

ornamentation grows from the repeat of a potentially endless number of geometrical star, interlace, tendril motifs in unending combinations and rhythms. Commencing in the 15th century, stencils were used for this purpose.

82 L 194 cm; wood; Cairo, Egypt; before 1889; Collection Emil Paravicini-Engel; III 342

Scroll painting thang ka

A mandala is a diagram consisting of circle and square. It unites the microcosm with the macrocosm and serves monks and nuns as an aid in meditation. The aim of meditation is to reach the state of complete emptiness of being – a prerequisite for the release from the painful cycle of rebirth.

83 L 75 cm; canvas, glue tempera, brocade; Tibet; around 1900; Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen; IId 13834

Amulet, length of Christ

The length of this strip is said to equal the height of Jesus. The roll of parchment is written on both sides: the one side features religious texts, the other magico-cabalistic signs and invocations used for exorcism purposes. Whoever bore the roll was safe from danger and harm.

84 L 175 cm; parchment, pigment; Zizers, Grisons, Switzerland; 18th c., Collection Emanuel Grossmann; VI 25297

Measure of a saint, length of Saint Mary

The strip of paper made up of six parts is printed on one side. It was believed to correspond with the height of Mary, mother of Jesus. Wrapped around a woman's body it was believed to alleviate the discomfort of pregnancy and the pains of labour. The practice emerged as early as the 17th century but was never condoned by the official Church.

85 L 171 cm; paper; Tyrol, Austria; 1746; Collection Conrad Welwert; VI 39612

Eternal light vessel

The silver-plated metal cone decorated with stylized angels was kept in a private home and served as a vessel for the eternal light. It was placed next to an icon. The concept of eternal light is common to Judaism as well as to Orthodox and Catholic Christianity. The light stands for the ongoing presence of God.

86 L 35 cm; metal, silver; Greece; around 1960; Collection Robert Hiltbrand; VI 31404

Hummer coffin

Among the Ga people of West Africa coffins are often fashioned in the shape of prestigious objects such as luxury cars or, as in this case, a Hummer. Fanciful designs were chosen to ease the deceased's entry into the beyond and to propitiate the future ancestor.

This specific coffin was commissioned by Museum Tinguely and created by the Ghanaian artist Kudjoe Affutu.

87 L 224 cm; wood, lacquer, pigment, foam rubber, textile; Ga; Awutu Bawyiase, Ghana; 2011; Artist: Kudjoe Affutu; Donation Museum Tinguely; III 27671

Entrance gate torii

Torii refers to a symbolic as well as a real entrance gate that marks the boundary between the sacred and the profane. This *torii* stands at the entrance to the Shinto shrine of Tōshōgū in the city of Nikkō. Shinto, an original Japanese religion, is one of the few beliefs that emphasizes life in this world and does not focus on immortality and eternity.

- 88 Digital copy of albumen print on textile; Nikkō, Japan; before 1949; unknown photographer; Collection heirs of Geigy; (F)IId 1299

Carving malagan

Malagan are carved sculptures that play a key role in a comprehensive and complex cycle of rituals of the same name. The preparations for a specific ritual enactment may last for years; afterwards the sculptures are symbolically killed. *Malagan* objects soon became sought-after collector items and thus quickly found their way into Western museums.

- 89 H 150 cm; wood, pigment, bast fibre; Fangalawa, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea; before 1932; Collection Alfred Bühler; Vb 10571

The great adventure

The little toy cars venture out into the wide unknown world. On their search of the big adventure, the photographer Kim Leuenberger stages the little heroes against the background of icons such as the Eiffel Tower or the Tower Bridge, or against untamed nature. On their quest in search of the unknown, the cars' puniness becomes blurred; they outgrow their playful nature and unexpectedly gain stature. The photographs not only play on the difference in size, but also on our understanding of what is small and what is big.

Wall installation: The Great Adventure – Toy Cars on a Journey

- 90 H 700 cm; large-format digital print on tarpaulin; photos by Kim Leuenberger (2013 to 2016) © Kim Leuenberger; graphical implementation by Serena Lo Presti, Museum der Kulturen Basel.

Small in big

These anthropomorphic guardian figures were produced by the Machiguenga people after a death in the community. They are placed along paths leading from the forest either to a garden or the village. These figures and the beings residing within them, respectively, frighten away or even kill the spirits of the dead if they return to haunt the settlement. Apparently, size has no influence on efficacy. At the same time, the Machiguenga are familiar with various benevolent spirits approximately the size of children.

Anthropomorphic guardian figures

- 91 Wood, carved, painted; Machiguenga; Tigonpinia, Rio Urubamba, Peru; 1978; Created by
92 Roberto and Zaila Leonidas; Coll. Gerhard Baer, IVc 21760, IVc 21761

Guardian figures (spectacled owls)

- 93 These figures are said to have been placed along riverbanks to serve as guardian beings.
94 Wood, carved, painted; Machiguenga; Shivankoreni, Lower Urubamba, Peru; 1969; Coll. Gerhard Baer, IVc 14023, IVc 14024

Thank you for returning this handout.