

Media release

125 Birthday Wishes

The Museum der Kulturen Basel is 125 years old, an anniversary we wish to celebrate with our friends and visitors with a special highlight each month. An unique event comes in the form of our anniversary exhibition “Take Your Pick – 125 Objects for 125 Years” in which the people of Basel get to choose what they would like to see on display.

The anniversary got off to a roaring start with a special birthday party at this year’s Basel Museums Night. But this was not all: eleven highlight events are to follow.

All cultures know how to celebrate – albeit in very different ways. This diversity is reflected in our special anniversary programme. Some of the events are for you to simply relax and enjoy, in others you are invited to join in.

The composer and musician Daniel Schnyder, for instance, sets out on a musical journey along the famous Silk Road. The Basel Symphony Orchestra offers the Museum a special birthday serenade. And Andrew Bond, who recently was awarded an honorary doctorate for his work, promises to light up children’s eyes with his open air concert. Buddha teaches us the art of mindful relaxation, Gsünder Basel physically sets culture in motion, while the Kids Holiday Town pitches its tents in the museum courtyard and offers games from across the world.

The Museum builds on participation

The Family Day in June is shrouded in mystery. The motto is “secrecy”. The exhibition under the same title opens in April. It presents a range of fascinating objects from the museum’s collections, each one bearing a special secret. Some of them are disclosed in the exhibition, thus revealing who’s allowed to know what.

Students of the University of Basel look into the Museum’s future by developing new forms of exhibiting. For its anniversary exhibition the Museum der Kulturen Basel is going new ways and building on participation. The people of Basel get to choose 125 objects from the museum’s collections which then go on show in September. It’s an exciting experiment for both sides, and actually quite unusual for the museum world.

The eventful year closes with the passing of the baton to the Basel Minster, which in 2019 is celebrating its consecration a thousand years ago. The theme of the event is translating. We cross from the Museum to the Minster with a boat from our collections in tow to symbolize the concept of transfer, thus emphasizing the significance of translation in both anthropology and theology, but also to mark the close neighbourly bonds between the two institutions.

Photo material

You can download the photographs from the MKB website:

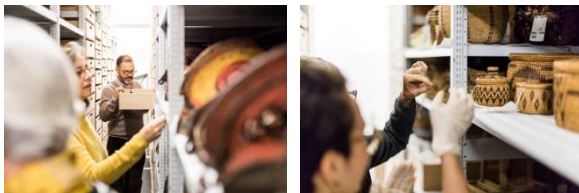
https://www.mkb.ch/de/informationen_services/mediendienste.html

Photo 1



Musician: Daniel Schnyder sets out on a musical journey along the Silk Road © MKB, Omar Lemke

Photos 2 and 3



Request programme: the people of Basel get the chance to select the objects they wish to see in our anniversary exhibition © MKB, Omar Lemke

Photo 4



Mystery-monger: the objects on display in the exhibition “Secrecy” are bearers of secrets © MKB, Omar Lemke

Photo 5



Declaration of love: browse through old love letters in the exhibition “Secrecy” © MKB, Omar Lemke

History of MKB

The Museum der Kulturen Basel is 125 Years Old

The Ethnographic Committee met for the first time in 1893. Hence the year is listed as the museum's founding date.

The origins of the museum trace back to the mid-nineteenth century. The “Museum der Stadt Basel” (Basel Municipal Museum) presented in the newly opened Berry building (1849), among other items, Lukas Vischer's remarkable Mexican collection, making Basel one of the first cities in Europe with an ethnographic collection open to the public.

In the early years it was the culture-minded members of the Basel upper class who supplied the museum with objects gathered on journeys across the world. Later, in the course of the professionalization of anthropology, the task of collecting was increasingly left to expert scholars such as Fritz and Paul Sarasin, Felix Speiser, Alfred Bühler, and Paul Wirz who significantly extended the range and scope of the museum's collections.

In 1892 the Basel government decided to separate the ethnographic from the historical-antiquarian collection, and set up a committee to manage the new collection. The committee met for the first time the following year, which is why 1893 is listed as the museum's founding date. But it was only in 1918 that the ethnographic collection was renamed “Museum für Völkerkunde” (Museum of Ethnology). Fritz Sarasin was the first chairman of the collection and director of the museum, respectively.

Reconstruction and repositioning in 2011

In 1944 the Swiss Federal Council granted the museum's European department, established in 1904, the title “Schweizerisches Museum für Volkskunde” (Swiss Museum of European Folklife). Henceforth the institution was called “Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweizerisches Museum für Volkskunde”. In 1996 the house received its present name Museum der Kulturen Basel.

One of the many highlights in the museum's history was the visit of the Dalai Lama in 2001 for the opening of the exhibition “Tibet. Buddha, Gods, Saints”, which was on show until 2008. A further milestone was the reopening of the museum in 2011 after extensive refurbishment. It included a repositioning in terms of content and design, an extension and redefinition of the copious courtyard, and a new entrance opening on to the Münster Square.

Highlight February

Sounds of the Silk Road

Concert, 27 and 28 February 2018

Daniel Schnyder has composed and arranged an exciting musical journey along the Silk Road. It merges East and West and brings traditional musical instruments to life with the power of evoking strong emotions.

Together with the Belenus String Quartet, the maestros Daniel Schnyder, Yang Jing, Bassam Saba, and Ruven Ruppik set out on a musical journey along the Silk Road. Schnyder's arrangements – based on traditional Chinese and Oriental rhythms, melodies, and themes – bring some of the region's main instruments to life (pipa, oud, Arabian ney, riq and tarabuka), highlighting the various regions' musical singularities as well as similarities.

The pipa, a plucked instrument, is China's national instrument. For many years Yang Jing, a true master of the pipa, played the instrument as a soloist in the National Pipa Orchestra. Travelling westwards, we encounter the Arabian culture with its main instrument, the oud, the famous Middle Eastern lute. The music becomes more sombre.

Apart from the oud, Bassam Saba will also play the ney flute, one of the oldest instruments known to humankind. This remarkable reed instrument with its enchanting sound commonly evokes strong emotions among local listeners. The Arabian ney is extremely difficult to play, but Bassam Saba is one of the best in the world.

Daniel Schnyder has studied Eastern music and its instruments intensely. On the occasion of this concert he merges all the foreign elements with a famous Western music tradition, the string quartet. Schnyder enjoys world renown as a composer, not least for his ability of bringing together far-distant, seemingly disparate musical traditions.

Programme

Ouverture Shourouk (Dawn)

Huan Wu (Dance of Joy)

Shajara (The Tree)

Concerto for ney and orchestra: Badr (Full Moon), Dawr Hindi, Nida'a, Karachi

Tales From Another Time (from the Oriental Suite)

Oyun II (from the Oriental Suite)

Sand (from the Oriental Suite)

Oyun I (Turkish dance from the Oriental Suite)

Da Kord

Musicians

Daniel Schnyder (saxophone), Yang Jing (pipa), Bassam Saba (oud and ney), Ruven Ruppik (percussion) and Raetus Flisch (bass)

Belenus Quartet: Seraina Pfenninger (violin), Anne Battegay (violin), Esther Fritzsche (viola), Basil Auslaender (cello)

The venue for the two concerts is the Hedi Keller Hall. Doors open at 18.30, the concert begins at 19.30. Before the concert you have the opportunity to visit the exhibition "Sun, Moon and Stars". Tickets cost CHF 28 and are available at the museum ticket office. Free seating.

Highlight March

What's Buddha doing in the wellness area?

Grasping Anthropology on 7 March

From the meditation room to the living room to the sauna – Buddha is everywhere. What's the source of this fascination in the Western world? Experts reflect on the relationship, take a closer look at Buddhist testimonies held in the Museum der Kulturen Basel, and end with a session on the art of mindfulness.

Siddhartha Gautama, better known as Buddha, lived in northern India around 500 BC. The young nobleman left his family in search of enlightenment. With success, as we all know, above all through meditation and asceticism. He taught and passed on his knowledge until his death at roughly the age of eighty.

Today we encounter Buddha in meditation rooms, wellness centres, as well as private homes. Buddha and his teachings enjoy continuing interest and fascination in the Western world. But how did they get here in the first place? How has Buddhism changed? And why is it in such demand? Three experts reflect on our relationship with Buddhism. Chaired by Sabine Rotach (head of Education and Outreach at MBK), Marta Kwiatkowski (trend researcher at the Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute), the philosopher Catherine Newmark, and Stephanie Lovász (curator for South, Central and East Asia at MBK) review Buddhism's history of reception in the West, how it has been adapted over the years, and shed light on its ongoing popularity.

Buddha figures also feature in current exhibitions at the Museum der Kulturen Basel, above all in the show "StrawGold". In a short guided tour Stephanie Lovász visits these testimonies of Buddhism and explains their nature and significance.

Reducing stress

To end the session, Regula Saner of the Centre for Mindfulness Basel offers an introduction into the art of mindfulness. The technique is very much in trend today. A set of simple exercises helps to reduce the level of everyday stress and teaches us to be more sensitive towards the world around us. The technique is recommended by doctors as a useful complement to customary forms of medical and psychotherapeutic treatment for people suffering from current or chronic health problems such as depression, anxiety, and insomnia.

The event is part of the monthly series "Grasping Anthropology", a special programme developed by the Museum der Kulturen Basel in which participants learn more about current cultural and social topics and issues through talks, workshops, guided tours, and readings offered by curators from the museum and guest speakers. Active audience engagement is a key aspect of the concept. The exchange of thoughts and ideas is an enrichment for both sides and shows that grasping anthropology is indeed possible.

Grasping Anthropology: What's Buddha doing in the wellness area? Discussion, guided tour, tea and snacks, mindfulness training. Wednesday, 7 March, 18.15 to 20.45. Admission fee CHF 16.

Highlights April

Secrecy – Who’s allowed to know what

The new exhibition opens on 12 April

Secrecy regulates who gets to know what and under what conditions, thus separating insiders from outsiders. At times the boundaries are clear, at others more vague, but by all means negotiable. The exhibition focuses on secrecy as an instrument of social order and how it is handled in different cultural settings – a classic topic in anthropology that has recently received renewed attention under the impact of Wikileaks and the extensive privacy debate.

The exhibited objects are bearers or at least markers of secrecy; they include, among others, masks belonging to secret societies, documents written in secret code, images of sacred mysteries, and chests equipped with hidden drawers. You get the chance to browse through encrypted passwords, read secret love letters, hear about the thrills and throes of secrecy, even entrust to a special box a secret of your own. Kids follow a hidden path in search of a safe for which, however, they need a secret code.

The opening is on Thursday 12 April, at 18.30. The show is on display from 13 April 2018 to 21 April 2019. It is accompanied by a publication of the same title in German as well as English, published by Hatje Cantz Verlag.

Birthday serenade

Concert on 27 May

It’s an open secret that the Basel Symphony Orchestra (SOB) is presenting the Museum der Kulturen Basel with a special anniversary serenade in which the world-renowned violinist Gilles Apap interprets Mozart’s Violin Concerto No. 5 interspersed with jazz and folk elements. Expect a true fireworks of sounds when he engages with the violinist Vincent Brunel and his folk band Eyrinn’s!

The concert starts at 11.00. Free admission. As is usual at the Basel Symphony Orchestra’s open-air concerts in the museum courtyard, picnics are allowed.

The secret

Family Day on 3 June

A host of secrets await our visitors, young and old, on family day. A mysterious trail leads through the museum to a hidden destination where they have to crack a secret code. In addition, you can have a try at deciphering a secret code or make a special doll to which you can entrust a secret of your own. The conjurers Duo Domenico will not only baffle you with their tricks, they will also let you in on some of their secrets!

Family day 10.00 to 17.00. Free admission.

For more highlights see our anniversary flyer!

Anniversary exhibition

Take your pick

For the anniversary exhibition at the Museum der Kulturen Basel the people of Basel get to choose what they want to see on display.

Making wishes is an appropriate theme for an anniversary exhibition, in this case meaning the show for the 125th birthday of the Museum der Kulturen Basel. To make this a very special event, the museum decided to involve the public more directly and have invited the people of Basel to select the objects they would like to see in the show.

At present a team of individuals and representatives from all kinds of local organizations and associations are combing through the storage depots, ranging from carnival enthusiasts to refugees to employees of Basel-based companies. Of course not all of them are regular museum-goers. Their task is to select roughly 300 objects they would like to see on display in the anniversary exhibition. In a next step the selected objects are presented online; then it is up to the people of Basel to make their choice. Online voting is open from 13 through 30 April. Everyone is free to choose his or her favourite object.

A matter of emotions

This is an experiment for all parties involved. People are likely to encounter things they are not familiar with, but which have an impact on them. It is this encounter that interests exhibition curator Karin Kaufmann. It tells her why certain objects are chosen, and by whom, and what people associate with them. On the first tours through the storage depots it also became clear that selection is primarily an emotional matter. It is possible that objects make the cut which would otherwise never be shown in an exhibition. For Kaufmann this kind of randomness bears tremendous creative potential and promises new and exciting insights.

On their part, visitors for once get to see what goes into the preparation of an exhibition, and not only the final product in the shape of the displayed object. This is exceptional, just as are visits to the storage depots from which the public is normally barred. It will also be interesting to see how the curator moulds an exhibition out of the objects the people select and what message she is able to put across. Normally a curator first decides on a theme for a show and then selects the objects accordingly. This time it's the other way around. Truly a challenging task!

Voting for the anniversary exhibition "Take Your Pick – 125 Objects for 125 Years" will take place from 13 through 30 April at www.bzbasel.ch/wuenschdirwas or at one of polling stations in the museum.

Celebrating across cultures

Buried in a Hummer

All cultures celebrate. Albeit in different ways and for different purposes. However, in the end, death unites us all.

One must celebrate when one has the chance. In Western cultures this is commonplace practice, but not necessarily so in other parts of the world. In Bali, for instance, festivities are determined more strictly by the calendar. This means that, before setting a date, specialists are asked to consult various calendars and only if the constellation is favourable can a feast or a blessing go ahead – even if it refers to such mundane things as a car, a motorcycle or certain farm animals. Some constellations are appropriate for banning evil forces, others for making offerings to the gods.

In Bali, time reckoning is different to what we are used to in Europe, and only to a limited degree defined by heavenly constellations. There is such a thing as a sun-moon calendar based on the normal twelve months, but in everyday life people prefer to rely on the Pawukon calendar which operates on a different basis. According to this system the year consists of 210 days divided into 30 seven-day weeks. One also has such things as one-day weeks, two-day weeks, etc., up to ten-day weeks. These all run parallel next to one another, with the three-day, five-day and seven-day weeks being the most prominent. In our exhibition “Sun, Moon and Stars” you have the opportunity to inspect and decipher some of these calendars.

Scarily beautiful

People on the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea do not spend much time celebrating birthdays, weddings or baptisms. Here the big things are initiations. Little is known about female initiations – most of them have ceased anyway – but male initiations are still spectacular events. They are performed in and in front of the large ceremonial houses which are propped by huge carved house posts. A few of these props are on display in the permanent exhibition “BIG”. Initiations last for weeks. Today they are tuned to the young men’s educational and professional careers. They mark the beginning of adult life and convey status on a man.

Scarification is a key element in initiation and men proudly off show their scarification marks which remain for life. They represent the bite marks of a mythical crocodile. The blood a man loses during the process is said to be female blood, to be more precise, his mother’s blood which he needs to shed in order to become a real man.

Death, too, is celebrated in Papua New Guinea. As with all other festivities, celebrations are quite excessive. A scarily beautiful case of mortuary customs is to be found among the Ga people of Ghana. Here one encounters spectacular figurative coffins. The tradition has a lot to do with the colonial past and the Christian missions. Today coffin making has become a profitable business for artists. The range of designs and motifs is incredible. A good example is on display in the show “BIG”: it represents a Hummer, the famous American SUV. Death is a fact among all peoples and cultures and so are funerals and mortuary feasts, across all continents.