

Media texts

Expeditions. The World in a Suitcase, as from 29 June 2012

Explorers on Expeditions: What they brought to Basel

The era from the end of the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century was the heyday of anthropological expeditions. Scholars from Basel too set out to study foreign cultures, bringing home with them rich collections of artefacts. The exhibition *Expeditions. The World in a Suitcase* follows on the trail of four of these journeys. The 540 artefacts on display in the exhibition help to explain what motivated the scholars to go on expeditions, and provide a sample of what they brought home to Basel in terms of collections and new knowledge.

The exhibition *Expeditions. The World in a Suitcase* takes the visitors on a series of journeys: with Paul and Fritz Sarasin to Sri Lanka (Ceylon 1883-86; 1890; 1902; 1907; 1925); with Felix Speiser to Vanuatu (New Hebrides, 1910-12); with Alfred Bühler to Indonesia and East Timor (1935); and with Paul Hinderling and René Gardi to Cameroon (1953). A look at further expeditions launched by Basel scholars evidences how the methods of anthropology have changed over the years: from travelling the world to long-term, in-depth field research in one location.

Measuring, collecting, and doing research

They returned from their five expeditions to Ceylon – today's Sri Lanka – with 441 objects and 542 photographs in their luggage: Paul Sarasin (1856-1929) and Fritz Sarasin (1859-1942), members of the Basel gentry, second-degree cousins, and explorers. They set out to do research on Ceylonese caecilians and elephant embryos and ended up studying the Vedda people, in their eyes an ancient, pristine tribe. They took measurements and prepared documentation with the intention of shedding light on the development of humankind and presenting to the people at home in Basel an accurate picture of a primitive, unspoilt tribe. Their first journey to Ceylon (1883–1886) was the first scientific expedition undertaken by the institution that later became the Museum of Ethnology – notably, without any government funding. The Vedda family cast in plaster on display in the show bears evidence to their interests. It was created by a professional sculptor on assignment, based on photographs and measurements provided by the Sarasins. Also on show is the skull of Miss Kumbuk, an elephant calf which the Sarasins brought back from their first journey to Ceylon and donated to the Basel zoo in 1886.

'We salvaged what we could'

The nephew of Paul Sarasin, Felix Speiser-Merian (1880 – 1949) was the first professor of anthropology at the university of Basel. From 1910 to 1912 he travelled the islands of the New Hebrides (today Vanuatu) in the South Pacific and assembled a rich collection from the islands' diverse ethnic groups. The expedition yielded over

3,000 artefacts, 1,500 photographs, and field notes and led to numerous publications. Like his predecessors Paul and Fritz Sarasin, Speiser was initially interested in seeking evidence of the evolution of mankind. Later in his career he increasingly shifted attention to the question of how regional cultures interacted and influenced each other. The idea of 'salvaging' cultures on the verge of extinction was a matter of great concern to him. In 1909, prior to leaving for Vanuatu, he wrote about his destination: 'Thus, we have yet an ideal field – provided some of the tribes are still left [...] But I believe some will still be around, giving me the chance to salvage as much as possible [...].' Like others before him, Felix Speiser funded his travels and his scientific work by private means. His Vanuatu expedition laid the foundation for the museum's world-famous Melanesian collection. The exhibition features, among other items, dance headdresses, workaday artefacts and ritual objects, as well as neck, ear, and nose ornaments.

Cultural relations and artistic style provinces

Because Alfred Bühler (1900–1981), teacher, geographer, and anthropologist, had proved himself as a researcher and collector for the Museum of Ethnology, the Museum Commission gave him a new assignment. In 1935 he set out for eastern Indonesia and East Timor together with Willy Louis Meyer (1899–1981), a dentist from Basel and a friend of his from student days. Bühler's mission was to augment the museum's Indonesian collection, a task he successfully fulfilled by bringing back 3,663 artefacts. The government funded the venture with 12,000 francs to which Alfred Bühler and Willy Meyer added roughly the same sum from private means. Bühler's research was aimed at learning more about the cultural relations, settlement waves, and migration routes in the region, and determining specific artistic style provinces. His expedition marked the beginning of the museum's pursuit of meticulously documenting pre-industrial technologies in all fields of craft, laying the foundation for Basel's famous textile collection and research tradition. The exhibition features a large selection of textiles, spoons, and other artefacts and offers insight into different manufacturing technologies.

Creating images of 'otherness'

Paul Hinderling (*1924) and René Gardi (1909–2000) visited north Cameroon from the beginning of January to early April 1953. It was the first scientific expedition launched by the museum to West Africa. During their research on the peoples and cultures of the Mandara Mountains the two men lived mainly among resident Europeans. René Gardi noted: 'I have done without images of the life of Europeans in Mokolo [...] in my opinion it was more important to include as many pictures as possible depicting native life.' Their primary interest lay in iron smelting and iron working. Paul Hinderling returned from the expedition with 545 artefacts, 630 photographs, 300 metres of film, and roughly fifty typewritten pages of field notes including sketches. René Gardi's luggage contained over 2,000 photographs, seven rolls of film, roughly 400 minutes of sound recordings, and a typewritten diary numbering something over a hundred pages. On display are roughly seventy artefacts and amazing, hitherto unknown photographs, films, and sound documents.

Of what concern are historical expeditions to us today?

For the curators Gaby Fierz, Richard Kunz, and Alexandra Wessel, creating links to the present is an important aspect of the exhibition, not least because our image of 'others' and alterity has been, and still is, shaped considerably by the way we view ethnographic artefacts and photographs of foreign peoples. The generation of knowledge about 'others' has a history – and it is this history the curators wish to make explicit, not least because it provides a key to evaluating and understanding present-day images of otherness.

The exhibition is complemented by a rich supporting programme of events and activities relating to issues of anthropology, both past and current.

Museum der Kulturen

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