

Thirst for Knowledge Meets Collecting Mania

22 March 2019 to 19 January 2020

Collection and exhibition policies have not changed simply as a result of the recent broad public discussions around the theft of cultural property. Yet, what does it mean for the work of museums today? The Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) addresses the challenges and opportunities under these new conditions in the exhibition “Thirst for Knowledge Meets Collecting Mania”.

Ivory netsuke were once popular collector’s items, bearing evidence to the high degree of Japanese craftsmanship where they were used as toggles to attach purses and small boxes to the sashes of the pocketless kimonos. Bird of Paradise plumages not only testify to the times when they used to be coveted goods in New Guinea’s colonial economy, they actually still serve as male adornment in ceremonies and feasts to this day. A trophy from Indonesia tells of the earlier fascination among Europeans for cultural practices such as headhunting.

In the new exhibition “Thirst for Knowledge Meets Collecting Mania”, the Museum der Kulturen Basel unfolds the diversity of cultures across the world, and, once again, invites visitors to change their perspective to help understand why, for instance, entire nations were so enthralled by ivory objects, or why the Zuni in the United States want to stop non-initiates from using kokko masks?

In the endeavour to capture the knowledge of the entire world, travellers, anthropologists, and missionaries collected and sent or brought back countless objects, so adding to the museum’s growing collections. Quotations by early collectors and curators bear evidence to their efforts and the elation they felt when a new acquisition came to fill yet another white spot on the museum’s world map. Since each and every object was a potential piece of evidence for the evolution of mankind, just about everything was collected. Later the focus shifted more to qualitative aspects such as authenticity, precise provenance, contexts, and scientific inquiry.

The collecting mania finds expression already in the opening room of the show with a table strewn with objects, including vases, planers, and fans. At that point, visitors already have the show’s “armoury” in sight: 289 of the totally 7,622 arrows held by the museum. Arrows served as an ideal basis for the comparison of cultures, and thus as a source to quench the thirst for knowledge.

Clarifying provenance

The weapons are followed by relics, sacred objects, and human remains. For many years, it was quite common to put skulls and bones on display, a practice which, under different circumstances, was shunned out of respect for the dead and afterlife beliefs. On the one hand, the exhibition questions such exhibition practices, on the other, examples from Mexico, Venezuela, and Fiji help to shed light on how and why collectors acquired grave goods and human remains, by quoting some of their original descriptions. They bear evidence to a different understanding of the world and scientific research in those days.

Today, all museums have the task of verifying the provenance of the objects they hold. They often have little to go by when it comes to identifying the producers, whose hands the objects passed through on their journey to Europe, and how they reached the museum. The last step, that is, who sold or donated an object to the museum, or whether an item was acquired by exchange, is usually quite well documented, as the exhibition shows. Restitution is only possible if an object’s exact provenance is known. The exhibition describes such a process with the aid of a preserved Maori head, which was recently returned to New Zealand. The museum was left with three plaster casts.

Exhibitions at the MKB once used to rely on specially made model figures to portray members of foreign ethnic groups as “lifelike” as possible. Actually, the only thing they achieved was to help create stereotypes. In the present show, the figures have a room to themselves. They invite viewers to reflect on their own position with regard to stereotypes in everyday life. The exhibition concludes in the here and now.