

Twelve thousand items – the beginnings of the European collection

At the Museum der Kulturen Basel, research into the provenance of European objects has resulted in an exhibition full of gripping, curious, tragic and moving stories about people and things.

12,000 objects from Europe were collected in the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) between 1900 and 1936, neatly recorded in the so-called accession book. At the start of the exhibition, visitors can browse through a copy of it. In it they'll discover what was purchased, exchanged or donated; where things came from, how much they cost, and who sold them.

Visitors will encounter some of those individuals again later in the exhibition. Take the museum caretaker, for instance, who was encouraged to look out for folk art objects while holidaying in the Jura mountains and to bring some back with him to Basel. Or Jakobina Thenisch from the Binntal in the Valais: she became friends with a teacher and collector from Basel called Annemarie Weis for whom she sourced everyday items and provided details about how to use them. Then there's Engelbert Wittich, a unique source of Yenish and Sinti objects from Germany.

Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer, the then curator of the European department, also puts in an appearance in the form of a man's suit that entered the MKB collection in 1924. Undertaking research for her dissertation a century later, the curator of the European collection, Tabea Buri, discovered that the suit had been Hoffmann-Krayer's very own, a fact he withheld at the time. The idea for this exhibition, incidentally, goes back to Buri's dissertation.

Several anchors reveal what was once popular with collectors. Cultural anthropologists at the time regarded anchors as objects that ideally illustrated stages of cultural development.

At the start of the 20th century, moreover, the search was on for what was considered to be archetypal. This explains the MKB's acquisition of parts of Tschäggtä, carnival figures from the Lötschental. A valley in the canton of Valais, it was not that untouched and remote from the world, however: one mask features a sack of flour from the USA at the back

The MKB agreed back then to exchange sixty-six other objects from the Valais for 28 items from the Arctic from the collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Hamburg (today's MARKK). Items were therefore collected with exchange in mind, too. To that end, the museum established a special collection of duplicates. They included medicinal receptacles from Cameroon that were exchanged for European headgear from the Ethnographic Museum in Zurich.

World War I

Some 370 exhibits give an impression both of daily and religious life in Europe around this time. Roughly 130 amulets reveal what people were afraid of, what they hung around their neck to ward off evil, to protect their health, or to bring them luck.

World War I left its mark on the era and the MKB, whose collecting activities were constrained by scarce funds and closed borders. People nevertheless needed money and were more willing to sell things. Interestingly, collectors were also dispatched to war zones: husband and wife Julius and Anna Konietzko, for instance, were sent to the Balkans from where they returned with many objects. Thanks also to items hand-made by soldiers, new collecting specialisms even evolved.

A few objects, incidentally, merit special attention: they have become the stuff of comics, tell their own story in monologues, or appear in stories written specially with young readers in mind. Visitors can even chat with five objects!

The exhibition runs from 26 April 2024 to 27 April 2025. Tabea Buri's dissertation "Wie die Dinge zusammenkamen" is available for purchase at the museum shop. See our [website](#) for images of the exhibition.