

In Full View

Provenance research is something everyone's talking about these days. From May, the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) will be conducting research for everyone to watch when workstations are moved to one of the museum's showrooms. Looking on as staff go about their work, the public can learn more by striking up a conversation with them at any time.

Who owns the objects in the MKB's collections? An answer to this question is needed for every single item. Provenance research has now picked up speed, and museum visitors are to be given the chance to observe it close up.

To that end, members of staff will be moving their workplace to one of the museum's showrooms. In a project series titled "In Full View", they will be spending a few weeks working in the Hedi Keller-Room during museum opening hours six days a week.

Researchers, conservators, photographers, as well as the logistics and communications teams, can be observed at close quarters, and will actively seek to engage members of the public in conversation. Museum staff are there to answer questions, to explain the work they do, and discuss things with visitors.

Objects will be on display, documentary material – letters, diaries, index cards, and more – will be available to inspect, and photographs will be projected onto walls. Visitors will be able to examine contracts and applications, or inspect measurements. Media folders along with publications provide additional background knowledge.

Sri Lanka and Hiva Oa

The "Dambana, Sri Lanka" project gets things under way in May. Vedda communities submitted two requests for the return to Dambana of 47 objects. This generated discussions, a research trip, and a series of applications. The entire process and how things currently stand will be on view.

In June, we move on to "Hiva Oa, French Polynesia". In 1932, two Basel men, Lucas Staehelin and Theo Meier, travelled to Hiva Oa, an island in the Marquesas group, to assemble a collection. Using some of the objects they collected, and in collaboration with the Museum, an exhibition is to be organized there. Visitors will be able to learn about the steps needed to make it happen.

Openness and transparency

Before their very eyes, visitors will see processes unfold that reveal a different view of the MKB's history, but also more recent developments that have left their mark on the institution.

"We no longer automatically consider objects to be the sole property of the MKB; the prerogative of interpretation no longer lies solely with us either now", according to the Museum's director Anna Schmid. "More importantly, it's open to debate whether Western scholarship here takes priority over other forms of knowledge."

The MKB's attitude has been further consolidated through dialogue with other cultures. These have always been taken seriously. "It goes without saying that we are open to other worldviews. However, it is now also becoming increasingly self-evident that communities of origin have the prerogative of interpretation over items in our keeping. We can only learn from that", Schmid stresses.

Questions raise further questions

The MKB seeks transparency in every regard – hence its "In Full View" series. It shows, moreover, that the MKB has taken on board the new definition of a museum, as recently agreed by the International Council of Museums, ICOM: MKB is also a "caretaker". It owes a duty of care to the items entrusted to it, and facilitates whatever the future holds in store for them. For instance, when it receives enquiries about specific items, or when guests or staff come across unusual items or archival documents while doing research. It is then at the latest that the question of provenance arises.

Each project gives rise to further questions: how did items enter the MKB's collection? In what context? What were they used for before? And today? Who thinks they are important? For whose benefit do they need to be made available?

Some things will remain hazy. Perhaps new avenues will open up, or new contacts will be found with whom the future of objects can be discussed, negotiated and realized: from lending to the circulation of objects to restitution, everything is possible.

A variety of research projects

"In Full View" will make museum visitors aware of all this while giving them insights into the sheer variety of the MKB's research projects. No two are alike; all require different preparations, a different approach, different tasks, and negotiations as well as a different understanding.

Take the lienzo, for instance: it is a kind of genealogical map from Mexico. Only a copy of it was requested to allow the town that originally owned it to work with it. Moreover, the town need not fear that the original will vanish into some underground government vault. In addition, collaboration with MKB is and remains guaranteed, according to expressive wish on their part.

The "Benin Bronzes" have generated a lot of media attention. They are considered the property of Nigeria, or more exactly the Benin royal family, and quite soon a request for their return might possibly be made. The return of the thulu tree to Australia has now been agreed and approved. As a quid pro quo, the MKB is set to receive a different object from the respective Kamilaroi community.

These are the first projects in our "In Full View" series:

07.05.202 – 31.05.2024
Dambana, Sri Lanka

26.06.2024 – 21.07.2024
Hiva Oa, French Polynesia

Downloadable images are available on our [website](#).