

Tree of life

Relations between humans and trees are diverse, even close occasionally. Objects and narratives from around the world reveal the significance of the Christmas tree, the tree of life and the world tree in our "Tree of life" exhibition.

Trees are among the oldest and largest living beings on Earth. Without trees, life as we know it would not be possible.

This is why, in many parts of the world, trees have come to symbolize life, community, and the cosmos. They connect heaven and earth, the upper and the underworld, and inspire stories and works of art. The objects and images, stories, poems and songs, rituals, and feasts featured in the exhibition show trees to be powerful forces.

In central Europe, people typically collected evergreen branches in the forest at the time of the winter solstice on 21 December to strengthen the hope for a return of spring in not too far a distance. Starting in German-speaking Europe in the 16th century, a decorated tree was installed in the home for Christmas, its candles a celebration of the birth of Christ.

The Mexican tree of life fuses the biblical story of the tree of knowledge and indigenous notions of the fruitful tree that produces life. Trees of life in the shape of candlesticks are carried in processions at the summer solstice and gifted to newlyweds.

Across various regions of Indonesia, the world tree symbolizes cosmic order and life. Its design often combines two different types of tree: the fig tree as a symbol of the creative spirit and fire, and the lotus as a symbol of purity and perfection.

One of the most significant motifs in the Indonesian puppet theatre is that of the world tree. It stands for the universe that every individual represents in microcosm.

Various depictions of trees from the museum's collections are displayed together with contemporary images. Zora del Buono is a writer and photographer who travelled in search of the largest and oldest trees in Europe and North America. She brought back with her impressive images and messages from the "life of the powerful". What would trees say to us if they could talk?

The exhibition runs from 22 November 2024 to 12 January 2025. Images are available to download from our website.