

Chocolate. The Art of Enticement

– The Museum der Kulturen Basel presents a sensual stroll through the cultural history of chocolate

It is exactly 500 years since 1592 when Christopher Columbus became the first European to learn of the existence of cocoa. From 30 November to 30 March, the Museum der Kulturen Basel invites visitors to a sensual stroll through the past and present history of this “food for the gods”. The exhibition “Chocolate. The Art of Enticement”, tells of the triumphal advance of cocoa and chocolate through past centuries, shows exhibits from cocoa’s countries of origin and presents some of the advertising used to entice us to indulge in this delicacy.

Chocolate and cocoa: almost all of us have a special relationship with what could well be our most important and delicious triviality. While some may sing the praises of this or that chocolate bar and the truffles of a specific *chocolatier*, others speak of a beneficial effect and extol the virtues of this luxury which, to them, is an absolute ‘must’. For many children, the consumption of chocolate starts at the breakfast table with a cocoa-laced beverage that is often teamed with müesli enriched with chocolate chips. Adults have no need to miss out, either: a cup of coffee often comes with a tiny wrapped chocolate bar or *Napolitaine*, while many desserts incorporate chocolate in one form or another.

Chocolate and cocoa accompany us throughout the day and throughout life, and yet we often forget that the cocoa tree is a cultivated plant from the New World just as much as corn, beans, potatoes, tomatoes, pumpkins and tobacco, which have their origins in parts of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and Honduras. To the ancient Mexicans, cocoa was originally a beverage of the gods, inducing Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus to give the cocoa tree the Latin name “Theobroma Cacao” (in other words “food of the gods”) in 1753.

Until the 16th century, Europeans knew nothing of this enticing fruit and the first European to set eyes on cocoa beans had no idea what to do with them. The discovery occurred exactly 500 years ago, on 15 August 1502, when Christopher Columbus saw what he thought were almonds during his fourth journey to the island Guanaja, and learned how much they were worth. However, cocoa only reached Europe a few decades later and trade in cocoa – long the monopoly of the Spaniards – only began in earnest in 1585. From the Iberian peninsula, drinking-chocolate gradually conquered the wealthy of the Old World as a “hot drink of delight”. Chocolate was prized above all as a source of strength and as a remedy for all kinds of ills. It only became a beverage of the people in the 19th century, when many chocolate companies came into existence. Thanks to a host of developments and inventions, these firms popularised eating-chocolate as the new luxury food. This transition was helped by various forms of advertising, such as huge posters, appealing packaging and countless sets of “chocolate cards” which cunningly encouraged customer loyalty by becoming coveted collectors’ items.

The cultural history exhibition “Chocolate. The Art of Enticement” tells the story of the triumphal advance of cocoa and chocolate. It shows exhibits from the countries where cocoa originates as well as some of the advertising used to entice us to indulge in this delicacy. Special attention is paid, not only to the importance of cocoa in pharmaceuticals, but in particular also to the manufacture of seasonal items (chocolate Father Christmases, Christmas tree decorations, Easter bunnies, etc.). The exhibition’s main sponsor is the Coop.

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30 November 2002 – 30 March 2003

Opening hours: Tues-Sun 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.

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