

Exhibition Review: *Memory: Momente des Erinnerns und des Vergessens*

The Museum der Kulturen in Basel repeatedly illuminates the most diverse areas of ethnography with a wide range of exhibitions. In the permanent exhibition *Memory: Momente des Erinnerns und des Vergessens* - curated by Alexander Brust - more than 400 objects from the collection are shown and the theme of how people forget and remember in different cultures is explored. The following text will examine how the objects and the exhibition were labelled with regard to provenance but also other information and how ethically sensitive aspects were dealt with.

The museum's website¹ offers a first insight into the exhibition: In addition to a description of the exhibition theme, there is a two-minute video with commentary from the curator. Furthermore, it is possible to download the 35-page exhibition text online to prepare for the visit.² These are also available in printed form in the museum for everyone to have at hand.

The exhibition is on the third floor of the museum and begins with an illuminated white wall displaying various souvenirs - from Holy Earth of Israel to Austrian paperweights³. Then it moves into a large, open space where the objects are displayed thematically. Seven themes are presented in the exhibition, which are further divided by different sub-themes depending on the groups of objects. These themes and objects are each accompanied by short texts.⁴

As already mentioned, over 400 different objects from the collection are on display. The oldest dates from the Neolithic⁵ and the newest from 2010⁶. The objects came from the most diverse places and continents. Thus, there would be countless stories about the way the objects came into the collection and their origin. The provenance information would thus be central. However, the objects are only labelled with the name of the object, the material, the date of origin,

¹ Memory: Momente des Erinnerns und Vergessens. Museum der Kulturen Basel. <<https://www.mkb.ch/de/ausstellungen/2020/memory.html> 30.05.2022>. 12.06.2022.

² Museum der Kulturen Basel 2020: Ausstellungstext Memory – Momente des Erinnerns und Vergessens. Basel: Museum der Kulturen Basel.

³ See object no. 140: Briefbeschwerer und Objekt Nr. 156: Heilige Erde. In: Museum der Kulturen Basel 2020: Ausstellungstext Memory – Momente des Erinnerns und Vergessens. Basel: Museum der Kulturen Basel, S. 9.

⁴ Museum der Kulturen Basel 2020: Ausstellungstext Memory – Momente des Erinnerns und Vergessens. Basel: Museum der Kulturen Basel.

⁵ See object no. 221: Graviertes Felsbild zweier Vogelstrausse, Antilopen und einer Hyäne. In: Museum der Kulturen Basel 2020: Ausstellungstext Memory – Momente des Erinnerns und Vergessens. Basel: Museum der Kulturen Basel, S. 14.

⁶ See object no. 366: Tasche mit Nelson-Mandela-Porträt. In: Museum der Kulturen Basel 2020: Ausstellungstext Memory – Momente des Erinnerns und Vergessens. Basel: Museum der Kulturen Basel, S. 32.

the acquirer as well as the inventory number and in some cases the type of acquisition (purchase, donation etc.).⁷ There is no further mention of the provenance, nor is there any information on the acquirer or the background of the acquisition. These would be central to being able to classify the object and the type of acquisition.

Besides the lack of provenance information, there are other ethical points of contention that stand out during the tour: For example, objects are exhibited that in the culture from which they originate would actually be destroyed out of respect for their ancestors. Such as, the ancestral masks from Bolivia are worth mentioning here. These were sunk or burned in a river right after they have been used for the festival.⁸ However, the museum does not address this problem and only emphasises the acquisition of the object. This raises the question of whether it is ethically correct to exhibit such objects. In my opinion, there should at least be a reference to this problem. Furthermore, the question arises whether the respective cultures and countries do not demand the return of the exhibited objects or whether there is any discussion in this direction at all. Among the objects are three Benin busts, the retention of which is currently the subject of much discussion. The museum refers to the current discussion in Switzerland by means of a QR code. Such references to possible discussions or further information would certainly be desirable on the part of the museum. It would also be interesting to find out what the people, tribes or regions concerned think of the way their objects are being handled.

In conclusion, the exhibition addresses extremely interesting and broad topics and offers visitors the opportunity to view many different objects from different places and times. However, there are some concerns from an ethical point of view. Besides the lack of provenance information, there is otherwise very little information about their acquisition. In addition, some objects would be destroyed in the respective culture that are being preserved here, which certainly needs to be discussed whether this is ethically justifiable. Apart from the reference to the current Benin discussion, there is no further information on current discussions or possible restitution claims surrounding the objects. Such suggestions and references to current discussions would be desirable and, in my opinion, would make the exhibition even more valuable and interesting.

⁷ For example, object no. 229 is labelled as follows: “229 Gedenkkopf eines Herrschers (*oba*); Benin City, Nigeria; vermutlich 16. H; Messing; William Downing Webster, Kauf 1899, III 1033“. Zu finden in: Museum der Kulturen Basel 2020: Ausstellungstext Memory – Momente des Erinnerns und Vergessens. Basel: Museum der Kulturen Basel, S. 16.

⁸ See object no. 259: Ahnenmaske. In: Museum der Kulturen Basel 2020: Ausstellungstext Memory – Momente des Erinnerns und Vergessens. Basel: Museum der Kulturen Basel, S. 19.

Attachment: Some impressions from the exhibition:



Fig. 1: Entrance into the exhibition on the third floor of the museum
(Photo: Medea Vögeli, Mai 2022)



Fig. 2: First room of the exhibition with a view of the different objects
(Photo: Medea Vögeli, Mai 2022)



Fig. 3: Last room with the topics politics of remembrance, experienced history and commemoration of the dead
(Photo: Medea Vögeli, Mai 2022)



Fig. 4: The three exhibited busts from Benin (number 229, 230 and 231 in the text of the exhibition, S. 16)
(Photo: Medea Vögeli, Mai 2022)



Fig. 5: References to the current discussion on Benin objects. Reference by means of this QR code; to be found next to the object description.

(Photo: Medea Vögeli, Mai 2022)