

The new permanent exhibition

Discover stories like a chain of pearls!



As the very heart of the new Weltmuseum Wien, the permanent exhibition has been redesigned from the ground up. Strung together like a chain of pearls, the series of stories told in the fourteen galleries feature the core of the permanent exhibition combined with contemporary interpretations. We would like to give you the opportunity to explore these galleries and get a first glimpse of what is to come at the new Weltmuseum Wien.

In the Shadow of Colonialism

Most of the world's population was dominated by foreign powers in the years between 1500 and 1920. This foreign rule was defined by conflicts and exploitation. Against this backdrop, ethnographic museums flourished in the 19th and 20th century and shaped stereotypical beliefs of lost or colonized cultures. As our Museum was one of those benefitting from Europe's colonial expansion, the stories behind many objects and how they were acquired are full of appropriation and colonial violence. Although the colonies gradually fought for and were granted their independence after World War II, it was as if time stood still in ethnographic museums. The cherished and seemingly timeless conceptions of 'us' and 'them' were only hesitantly challenged as late as in the 1980s. Today we face our colonial past not only to raise awareness



but also to learn from it. After all, how we deal with our collections and the people related to them in the present will shape the image of ethnographic collections in the future.

Benin and Ethiopia: Art, Power, Resilience

The West African kingdom of Benin and the Ethiopian Empire in the east of the continent were already known to Europeans in the late 15th century. Both engaged in intense exchange first the Portuguese and later with other European envoys and merchants. Aside from these historical intersections, both states feature a series of other remarkable parallels that ultimately allowed parts of their cultural heritage to end up in Vienna.

Art treasures from the Benin Kingdom and imperial gifts of Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II to Emperor Franz Joseph I are among the most precious African holdings of the Weltmuseum Wien. Although the circumstances of how the two collections came to Vienna are fundamentally different, both are related to the colonial annexation of the African continent. While Oba Ovonramwen, King of Benin, opposed British interests and lost his kingdom as well as the royal treasures in the late 19th century, Emperor Menelik not only expanded his empire but also formed diplomatic alliances with European powers. As the collections in Vienna are a direct result of these historical events, they can tell us a lot about the history, wealth and splendour of these empires and yet serve as reminders of their fight for freedom. The exhibition accommodates both contexts while reflecting postcolonial changes in both cultural contexts and illustrating contemporary connections to Austria and the Weltmuseum Wien.

Culture war in Vienna

In the late 19th and early 20th century, conservative Catholics engaged in a so-called Kulturkampf [culture war] against the "godless" modern world, a fight that was to last until the National Socialists came to power in Austria in 1938. As a member of the missionary congregation S.V.D., Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954) considered the emerging discipline of ethnology to be an opportunity to scientifically support the social teachings of the Church.

Their basic principles: the development of humanity began in paradise; monogamy is the archetype of all human relationships; God had revealed himself to his creatures since the beginning of time. In order to substantiate these Christian values by means of ethnology, Wilhelm Schmidt encouraged his confreres and students F. Martin Gusinde and F. Paul Schebesta to document the material culture and religious beliefs of "lower hunters", as these "most primitive" peoples living in inhospitable regions and dense primeval forests stood closest to divine creation.

Today F. Wilhelm Schmidt's "universal history of humankind" is obsolete. The collections compiled by his confreres, however, remain an invaluable cultural legacy.

An Austrian Mosaic of Brazil

The foreign policy of the House of Habsburg was characterised by its expansion of power through marriage alliances. In 1817, Austrian Emperor Franz I sent his daughter, Archduchess Leopoldine, to Brazil: still terra



incognita for Europeans at that time. A scientific expedition joined Leopoldine across the Atlantic to study the country's people, flora, and fauna.

Brazil immediately cast a spell on zoologist Johann Natterer who stayed for 18 years and sent an extensive ethnographic collection to Vienna. Austrian scientists, diplomats, travellers, and museum staff have been expanding this collection ever since.

The exhibited objects tell fragmented stories of creation myths, the rise and fall of Amerindian cultures in colonial times, and first contacts with all their catastrophic consequences. They are told from many different perspectives: naturalists of the 19th century, scientists of the 20th and 21st centuries, and by indigenous people themselves. All of these voices speak the language of their time, culture, and individual personality: a language we sometimes may not immediately understand.

1873 – Japan comes to Europe

The World's Fair in Vienna in 1873 marked an important moment in the history of Japan. After being forced by external pressure to open up, and after an interior restructuring of the country, Japan found itself in turmoil. Following the abolition of the old feudal system in the course of the Meiji Restoration, Japan endeavoured to present itself in Europe as a modern state.

A commission, to which also foreigners such as the brothers Alexander and Heinrich von Siebold belonged, was formed in Japan. According to the officially published catalogue, this group compiled over 6,000 objects to be presented in Vienna.

A key theme of the exhibition in Vienna was architecture, and one of the largest items exhibited in the Japanese pavilion at that time was the model of a daimyō residence of the Edo period (1600 – 1868); this is the central piece of this gallery. Objects from the collection of the World Museum Vienna serve to illustrate the residence of a feudal lord and member of the Japanese military elite.

The second half of the room is devoted to the cultural exchange between Japan and Europe in the Meiji period (1868 – 1912). The artistic movement of Japonism was a Western response to the new language of forms, and Japanese ornament found its way into, amongst other things, Art Nouveau style.

Collecting Craze. I Suffer from Museomania!

Hunting and studying trips are part of the Habsburg family tradition. Intrigued by everything exotic and captivated by their passion for collecting, three young archdukes set out to travel the world in the 19th century. Two of them have private museums in mind: for self-presentation as well as to emphasise their monarchical qualities. Franz Ferdinand clothes his imperial claim to power in the words: "I suffer from museomania!"

In 1850, eighteen-year-old Ferdinand Max, the later Emperor Maximilian of Mexico, takes his first trip to the Aegean. He subsequently travels all over the Mediterranean, encourages Austria's first voyage of circumnavigation, and visits the tropical world of Brazil. His plans for a museum never leave the drawing board. Ferdinand Max is executed in 1867.

Crown Prince Rudolf embarks on a trip along the Nile at 23 years of age in 1881. He has a deep passion for natural sciences just like his uncle Maximilian. Rudolf initiates an ethnographic encyclopaedia about the Danube Monarchy and promotes a collecting journey to East Africa. A bullet ends his life in 1889.



Three years later, Franz Ferdinand is 29 years old and sets forth on his voyage of circumnavigation. After the death of his cousin Rudolf, he is the next in line to the throne. Franz Ferdinand envisions the largest private museum in Vienna and dedicates the same premises to his extensive collections, which are the home of today's Weltmuseum Wien. He is assassinated in 1914.

South Seas: Encounters with Paradise Lost

Long before European ships of discovery ventured into Pacific waters, seafarers from East and Southeast Asia explored the seemingly paradisiacal South Seas. In a number of waves of migration, they settled with their families in Australia as well as the island worlds of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia.

European marine expeditions in the modern period not only had as their goal the discovery and development of unknown regions of the world, they were also precursors of the colonial conquest of the world. Four expeditions (three of them by the British seafarer Captain James Cook (1728-1779)) to the South Seas, journeys with which the history of Austrian museums is closely connected, tell the story of eventful encounters with the inhabitants of the Pacific islands. These relationships were characterised by dignified receptions, esteem and respect, but also by conflicts, hostility, and death. Numerous objects of daily life, adornment, and ritual recall the first contacts, active bartering, and mutual hospitality, yet also violence, resistance and centuries of foreign interference.

At the Threshold of the Orient

"Asia begins to the south-east of Vienna." This saying is attributed to Prince Metternich, statesman in the service of the Habsburgs. Vienna, a city on the border of Europe and Asia; to the east and as a counterpart to the civilised occident, the Orient - both menacing and alluring.

Encounters between these worlds, artificially divided into Occident and Orient, are characterised by fear and attraction. People transfer their own sensitivities and desires onto that which is new and unfamiliar. Sometimes they might even find it intoxicated by it, until one day unexpected sides of the opposing culture reveal themselves, and admiration turns into contempt.

Objects from daily life reflect the commercial and cultural attitudes of Vienna towards the immediately adjacent Orient. Souvenirs and the biographies of individual collectors provide a narrative of the multifaceted contacts between Vienna and the east, from the Biedermeier period until the beginning of the 20th century.

Stories from Mesoamerica

The first written evidence of Mexican objects in Austria is found in the inventory of the Chamber of Art and Wonders at Ambras Castle in 1596: the list included those feather objects that are known all over the world today. The artefacts of Ambras Castle can be traced back to the 16th century and the earlier pre-Columbian time.

Further treasures from the colonial period were once found in the Habsburgs' treasuries and chambers of curiosities in Graz, Vienna, and Prague. When Maximilian of Habsburg was the emperor of Mexico (1864–1867), extensive archaeological collections were assembled that the Museum was able to acquire in the



late 19th century. One of the focus areas is the religious world, primarily reflected in the stone sculptures of gods. Aside from the pre-Columbian and the colonial period, the third section of the gallery represents the modern era, first and foremost with examples of popular piety around Maria de Guadalupe and All Saints'/All Souls' Day. The gallery also displays traditional Mesoamerican attire of women, the so-called huipiles. The collections dedicated to contemporary folk art and women's clothes from Mexico and Guatemala were established on the initiative of Etta Becker-Donners, the former director of the Museum.

A Village in the Mountains

This gallery offers the opportunity to take part in the life of the residents of a Himalayan Buddhist village. Participating in the life of "others" also means asking questions of oneself: Where is the centre of my life? Who do I share it with? Why do I leave it? Where do I work? How do I view my environment? Which gods do I believe in and where do I encounter them? And perhaps the most fundamental of all questions: How do I explain the world to myself?

The model staging of a village in the mountains reveals how the residents of such a village answer these questions. This schematic representation focuses on the relationships between individuals living and working in different places. Some live in the house in a village and work in the surrounding fields, some on pastures higher up the mountain, others as monks or nuns in a monastery, and very few are drawn to a solitary and ascetic life in the mountains. Particular attention is dedicated to the intertwining of religious beliefs and profane actions. It is this connection that unlocks the meaning of the world for those living in the Himalayas.

This world no longer seems to attract many young people. Especially those with a formal education venture out and seek a better life in the cities with all their risks and opportunities.

Fascinated by Indonesia

Indonesia – the vast archipelago in the Far East has a name to conjure with for many people. The Dutch writer Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker, 1820–1887) used to call the 18,000 islands "The Emerald of the Equator". Island dreams of such glamour have been woven together with the stories and experiences of the individuals portrayed in this gallery.

Their experiences enable us to trace back the relations between Indonesia and Austria almost 150 years. Each of them portrays the country at a certain time in history. They are individual snapshots, moments recorded in their respective societies. The life of the painter Raden Saleh, for example, tells a story of colonialism, and the back and forth between two worlds, while Austrian Consul Johann Schild rather foregrounds his love, fascination and interest in the country. Entrepreneur Helene Potjewijd sells a piece of Balinese paradise to tourists, whereas Indonesian curator Jani Kuhnt-Saptodewo deciphers key symbols of Indonesian society in batik fabrics.



World in Motion

There are countless reasons why people pack their bags and leave their country. Not only people but also objects, inventions, ideas, and opinions travel. This results in encounters, exchanges, global interrelations, and cultural diversity. It is this diversity that defines Vienna and shapes our everyday life.

Today more than 100 languages are spoken in the city. People of different backgrounds and origins have been living and working here since the Roman Age. They chose Vienna to be their second home and left their mark through products, knowledge, and cultural lifestyles they brought with them. The family histories of these immigrants often spread across several countries.

Not only Vienna but the entire world is in motion. Societies are changing all the time. Whatever is true today might not be valid anymore one day later. Knowledge, techniques, and objects are divorced from their contexts and reinterpreted. How can a museum react to these developments and accelerated processes? Which current objects must be collected as witnesses of our time, so we will be able to reflect on the here and now?

Into a New World

The nomadic and equestrian cultures of the North American Plains have become both an archetype and stereotype for American Indians: i.e. a warlike people riding horses and hunting buffalo. In fact, this way of life only developed after the introduction of the European horse. Dominant as these images still are in the public's imagination, the Plains cultures were not the only native tradition in North America.

Completely different customs existed in other areas of the continent. From the primeval forests in the East through the Great Plains at the centre of the continent, and crossing the Rocky Mountains to the temperate rainforests of the West right up to the Arctic desert of the North: the populations of these four regions demonstrate how diverse and dynamic native cultures of North America have always been. Despite oppression and destruction, these cultures are still vibrant.

The exhibits reveal that traditional materials and shapes are still both used and produced. Yet, adaptations and innovations continue to be introduced. Today, additional native identities find expression in new media as well as such items as baseball caps with labels like "Native Pride" and national flags with symbols of tribal identities. The Viennese collection demonstrates in an exemplary way both old and changing traditions.

A New Perception – View on China

Archaeological findings, such as silk and jade, throughout the area of the Roman Empire prove that these valuable goods already found their way from the Han Empire to Europe two thousand years ago. In the Age of Enlightenment (ca. 1650–1800), the upper class was eager for Chinese luxury goods, e.g. porcelain, tea, lacquer work, or silk. Moreover, sophisticated accomplishments, such as the concept of order in Confucianism or an education-oriented civil service culture, shaped Europe's view on China.

Geopolitical interests resulted in a sudden change in Europe's perception of China in about 1800. In the course of industrialisation, the West needed new sales markets and intended to expand its political-economic sphere of influence. The period of the 19th century was characterised by wars between China and



Europe, ranging from the so-called Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) to the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, in the suppression of which the Imperial and Royal Army of Austria-Hungary was also involved. Once positively connoted Chinese values changed to the opposite and were perceived as despotic, cruel, and backwardly.