

Fragments: pots, patchwork, power figures

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Statues without arms, pots with stitched seams, patchwork fabrics: the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) holds thousands of items that have been pieced together, repaired, or left incomplete. Despite this, or precisely for this reason, they were granted substantial significance and often imbued with new potential.

The exhibition “Fragments: pots, patchwork, power figures” goes in search of the practices that lie behind sewing together, repairing, even destroying or leaving objects to slowly decay. In every patchwork fabric, in every mended vessel, and in every power figure lies knowledge, skill, and history.

A modern wall sculpture made of assembled carton packages provides a graphic introduction to the exhibition’s theme. In his works, the Zimbabwean artist Wallen Mapondera joins memorable historical events with personal experiences.

The power of combination

In five stations we reveal the power of joining, the art of separating, and the force of destruction. The aesthetics that pieced-together objects can radiate is visibly borne out by the textiles on display. Whether we are dealing with clothing items, cloths, blankets, or carpets, what they all have in common is that they are fitted together from separate parts – occasionally randomly, usually in a planned process. Items such as quilts from the USA, ralli from Pakistan or Basel carnival costumes show that sewing together pieces of cloth can result in true works of art.

Through joining together, textiles are often also invested with meaning: in many parts of North and West Africa, patchwork robes were considered a sign of power, prestige, and dignity. In Sudan, jibba even became a symbol of resistance against colonial rule.

Appliqués on garments and substances enclosed in figures lend the objects special powers. The jumlo dress from Pakistan was said to have the power to ward off evil forces. The shaman’s robe from Siberia lent the person wearing it the power to fight off illness. The West African hunters’ shirts with their sundry array of animal trophies functioned in a similar manner. Power figures that contained potent medicines protected members of the community from sickness, accidents, and all kinds of negative forces.

Left to decay

Frequently, fragments are the result of cultural, social, and religious practices of division, for instance, when relief plates, pedestals, and gable figures were removed from buildings, often by force. On display in the exhibition are also figures with missing extremities and sexual organs. Or we only have their heads. Visitors discover that a Buddha head without its body is actually the result of an act of violence but, when sold to the West, came to be viewed as a work of art. Among the Aztecs, the head stood for both the corporeal and spiritual aspect of a person.

Some things are discarded deliberately or simply left to decay. The Colombian statues on display, however, were neither taken to the forest and left to decay nor were they thrown into a river, but handed over to a European collector instead. The decision to destroy an item is often taken in connection with death. In many cultures, death poses a danger to those left behind. A good example at hand are the doorboards from a house in New Caledonia. In mourning rituals, the kin of the deceased house owner would belabour the doorboards, which were richly decorated carved faces and geometrical patterns, with axes.

The exhibition is on display from 29 April 2022 to 22 January 2023. A walk-in workshop in the exhibition provides a chance to watch the MKB's conservators restoring objects.

The exhibition comes with a richly illustrated volume in German and English.

Picture material is available on our website: <https://www.mkb.ch/de/services/medien/clp-o/medienbilder.html>