

kunstmuseum basel

Making the World

Spiritual Worlds

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“Making the World – Spiritual Worlds”

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In the headers of the entries

“MKB” stands for Museum der Kulturen Basel,

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Making the World

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Introduction

A Collaboration between Kunstmuseum Basel and Museum der Kulturen Basel

During the refurbishment and extension of the Kunstmuseum Basel, a sizeable collection of its old masters featured as guests at the Museum der Kulturen Basel in 2015/2016. The exhibition *Holbein. Cranach. Grünewald—Masterpieces from the Kunstmuseum Basel* was shown in the two-storey gallery called Anchor Room. This room, and especially its unusual height, prompted a rather unusual hanging, allowing a new perspective on both the individual works and the ensemble as a whole to unfold. This perspective extension was also brought about by the show's setting and the unfamiliar house with its quite different exhibitions. This change to the context was frequently addressed on the guided tours offered jointly by staff members of both houses. According to the art historians and anthropologists involved, this kind of border-crossing presentation was both inspiring and enriching, and, in the end, gave rise to the idea of expanding the collaboration from the level of event to the exhibition level.

The aim of the collaboration in the present project was to develop the theme of the exhibition together from scratch. Hence, the members of the joint project team embarked on a fascinating journey, for one thing into the others' specialist field, for the other into the storage rooms of the respective museums. Numerous ideas grew from this exploration, which, however, were quickly discarded again, for a variety of reasons. Mind you, there was one constant that permeated all project outlines: the convergence of the two fields in terms of content as well as visuals. With this collaboration, we are thus taking up the challenge of giving new impetus to the long series of efforts to relate collection and museum sectors that are today perceived as different.

The emergence and growth of separate scientific disciplines in the 19th century inevitably brought with it the separation of museum collections into independent holdings: out of universal museums, which served as homes for everything worth collecting, became specialist museums, including museums of history, art, antiquity, ethnography, natural history, and so forth. This segmentation required criteria by which single objects and collections could be assigned to distinct museums. In the process, artefacts from non-European cultures were allotted to ethnographic museums and thus separated from

artworks of the Western world, both institutionally and conceptually. Under the label of “art or context”, discussions whether works from non-European cultures were to be assigned rigorously to ethnographic museums or whether they did not rank as artworks after all and therefore belonged into museums of art went on for decades. When, occasionally, the two categories were merged and shown together, for example, in a special exhibition, this usually triggered at times heated discussions with regard to the mode of presentation and whether or not the exhibits were being exploited, implicitly or explicitly, for other purposes such as elevating or exalting Western culture over non-European cultures in the typical colonial spirit of “the West and the rest”.

Probably the most famous example to date is the exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* curated by William Rubin at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984. The exhibition and the accompanying publication triggered a storm of protest among anthropologists, who seriously questioned whether the show was not simply an attempt to re-appropriate or reincorporate ethnographic objects and artworks for the sake of promoting and celebrating the “Western modernity” project. Further reproaches addressed the reduction of ethnographic objects to their formal features and merely “parading” them as sources of inspiration for Western artists. A further point referred to the implicit “promises” raised by the title: Critics argued that the term “affinity” should not have been taken in its pure allegorical sense. A genuine understanding of the term affinity would have also appealed to historical, economic and political aspects; this would have approximated a more “authentic” and equal treatment of the works on display. None of the numerous subsequent projects on the subject voiced such a far-reaching claim and none achieved anywhere near the same level of attention.

The problems brought to light by the criticized approach with its implicit Western bias have by no means been resolved; however, they do not deter us from undertaking further experiments in this—hopefully promising—direction. The fruits of our collaboration, that is, the two exhibitions by the title of *Making the World*—the one in the Museum der Kulturen Basel, the other in the Kunstmuseum Basel—need to be viewed as part of this ongoing debate. For us it was important from the start, to avoid a confrontational approach in any form, including the idea of pure juxtaposition, nor do we place emphasis on comparison, not least because comparing the works would call for clear and accountable criteria. Instead, our idea is to unfold possible ways of viewing and understanding the works that result from the relationships that ensue when objects are physically assembled in a shared space and therefore automatically start communicating with each other.

While, in the past, art history and anthropology relied on distinct methodological approaches and procedures, for some time already the two disciplines have been inquiring how humans are intertwined with the world around them: what kind of world do creative individuals imagine and what worldview do they set out from? What intention are they pursuing and what does the respective artefact teach us about the worldview it is based on? What effect on the world does the creation of a work engender, considering that every creative act, even the most minute, inevitably changes the world as the sum of all existing facts and subjective attitudes?

With these questions in mind, the respective curators of both houses undertook numerous excursions to the respective storage rooms, selected works and questioned them, and revisited their appraisals on an ongoing basis. In long and intensive discussions, they carefully and gradually closed in on the topic, step by step and in a constant exchange of opinions. The process demanded the bridging of fundamentally different working methods between anthropology and art history; each had to learn to understand the other's way of seeing things and take into account the resulting premises in terms of implementation. The focus was always on how the selected works related to one another and what kind of dialogue the relationship engendered, but also on how they could be grouped into thematic galleries along with the nature of the dialogue between the galleries.

Now, as an outcome of this meticulous process, both museums are each presenting an exhibition on *Making the World*. Beginning in March 2021, the Museum der Kulturen Basel is showing *Lived Worlds* sectioned into four separate but interrelated galleries: "Relationships", "Orientation", "Traces", and "Imaginations". From November 2021, the Kunstmuseum Basel will focus on *Spiritual Worlds* divided into "Higher beings", "Transitions", "Absence" and "Origins". The works were selected according to content-related aspects, thus infusing each individual exhibit with tangible meaning—in addition to its aesthetic and artistic quality. Beyond this, the works develop impact on the strength of their presence, their aesthetic power, and their expressiveness, underpinned by the special nature of the exhibition setting which allows them to unfold their innate powers.

What this actually means, can only be experienced in the exhibition itself: impressions evolve with each step through the galleries, relationships are forged by viewing the works in their given space, dialogues unfold by selecting and highlighting single aspects of the works in their specific assemblage—namely, by each and every visitor. Although the arrangement of exhibits, the exhibition design, the lighting, and other resources tend to influence the mode of interpretation, they should by no means dominate the ensembles.

Acknowledgments

The exhibition looks back on a long lead time. Collaborative projects are undoubtedly worthwhile and extremely enriching—not least because the partners often question the perspective of the other’s discipline. But they also demand a different kind of work coordination between the institutions involved, each with its own logic and “way of doing things” which is often determined by the genres of the objects concerned. Against this background, it is all the more remarkable that the two exhibitions could finally be realized—especially since much of the work had to be done under the difficult conditions of the Covid pandemic.

All the more, we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to all those involved in the project. First and foremost, this applies to the project heads in both museums as well as the responsible curators and their associates. Following the selection of works, the loan requests were submitted, discussed in both museums, and, finally, approved. Upon this, the staff in the restoration and design departments were able to get down to work. In the meantime, texts had to be written, edited, proofread, and translated; a marketing concept was developed and subsequently implemented; for the mounting of the exhibition, we were able to rely on the active assistance of the art handling teams.

We would like to thank the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, its chairwoman, and the Schaulager staff involved in the project for allowing us to show two of their works in the exhibition. The MKB request submitted at very short notice was processed speedily and in a remarkable “good neighbourly” manner. Our thanks also go to all those who have backed and supported the project as a whole.

Last but not least, we hope that the positive, creative unrest that we experienced during the realization of the project carries over to each and every visitor and that their dialogue with the works generates the same inspiring power that we experienced during the preparation of the exhibition.

Josef Helfenstein, Anna Schmid

Metaphysical Beings



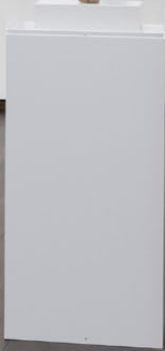


Informational text block on the left wall.



Informational text block on the right wall.

Informational text block on the right wall.



***Pantak* figure of a high-ranking ancestor | Borneo, Indonesia |
beginning of the 20th c. | wood | 101.7 × 95 × 17 cm |
MKB, Peter Horner coll., acquired 2008, Ilc 22345(01–03)**

**Theodoor van Loon (1581/82–1649) | *The Mystery of the
Resurrection* | Brussels | c. 1620/25 | oil on canvas |
187.5 × 126 cm | KMB, long term loan of the Katholische
Universitätsgemeinde Basel**

Efficacy from Beyond

Pantak were carved for deceased, high-ranking members of society and serve as abodes for their souls. Their facial features bear resemblance to those of the dead, and their spiritual presence guarantees protection and well-being for the bereaved.

In van Loon's complex Christian allegory the risen Savior is accompanied by numerous assistant figures: the Mother of God and the evangelist and favorite disciple John, other saints, angels and angel putti. His staging in a triumphant appearance strengthened contemporary believers in their prospect of an eternal life that would one day be granted to them. In this world, however, the victorious church offering protection and assistance to the orthodox in every situation of life is also referred to.



***Shiva Natarāja* | India | 20th c. | Copper alloy cast and patinated | 50.5 × 30 × 24 cm | MKB, Wilhelm Meyer coll., presented by its bequest 1992, Ila 10687**

Jan Steen (1626–1679) | *Christ among the Doctors* | c. 1659/60 | oil on canvas | 84.5 × 101 cm | KMB, Hans Vonder Mühl Bequest 1914, Inv. 906

The most Talented God

Here the god *Shiva* performs a cosmic dance: *Natarāja* means “king of the dance” in Sanskrit. According to one version of the underlying myth, Shiva emerges victorious from a dance contest with the goddess *Kālī*. As *Natarāja*, *Shiva* is both creator and destroyer of the world. He stomps the world out of the primordial sea, destroying ignorance in the form of a dwarf under his feet. For this he marks the cadence with an hourglass drum in the right upper hand. In the upper left hand he holds fire as a symbol of destruction.

The Christian savior also has unusual abilities even in childhood. At the age of twelve, he absconds from his parents on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, who search for him desperately for three days. They finally discover him in the temple, where he discusses theological questions at the highest level with the doctors present. Jan Steen hints at Jesus’ superhuman knowledge through an apparition of heaven and light that inexplicably breaks into the interior at that moment.



**Buddha *yakushi nyorai* | Japan | c. 1900 | gilded wood,
metal, glass | 248 × 182 × 115 cm |
MKB, gift of the Freiwilliger Museumsverein 1920, Ild 1212**

**Niklaus Manuel Deutsch (c. 1484–1530) | The Virgin and
Child with St. Anne, St. James the Great and St. Roch as
Intercessors for Humanity Suffering from the Plague | Bern |
c. 1514/15 | painting in ‘Tüchlein’ technique without varnish |
139 × 112 cm | KMB, Amerbach Cabinet 1662, Inv. 423**

Faith in Healing

The statue represents the Medicine Buddha *yakushi nyorai*, who heals all diseases according to *Mahâyâna* Buddhist belief. The right hand is raised in the gesture of promise of protection and encouragement (*abhayamudra*). In his left hand he holds the myrobalane fruit, one of the most important remedies of traditional Tibetan medicine. In general, each Buddha liberates from the mental poisons that keep people in the cycle of rebirths (*samsara*).

Bern in the early 16th century: epidemics such as smallpox and syphilis, spread by returning mercenaries, were rampant. As the plague saint par excellence, St. Roch is the perfect subject for this monumental votive picture probably donated to the Dominican church in Bern. The apostle James and St. Anne, the latter particularly popular at the time, promised salvation from suffering, too. Among the real persons asking for this grace in the lower part of the picture, some of which are certainly to be read as donor portraits, those on the left are already marked by illness.



Relief *Kalyānasundara-mūrti* | Southern India | 20th c. |
wood | 34.5 × 111 × 9 cm | MKB, Jean Eggmann coll.,
gift 2003, Ila 11355

Pair of figures *Shiva and Parvatī* | India | 20th c. |
cast copper alloy | 38 × 30 × 13 cm | MKB, Wilhelm Meyer
coll., presented by its bequest 1992, Ila 10688

Nicolò Bambini (1651–1736) | *Mars and Venus Surprised by
the Gods* | Venice | c. 1700/10 | oil on canvas | 100 × 81.8 cm |
KMB, Birmann Collection 1859, Inv. 734

Depictions of Divine Marriages

The carving is an “image of the beautiful wedding”, according to the title translated from Sanskrit. It refers to the marriage of *Shiva* and *Parvatī*, the second wife of the god, who is a reincarnation of his first wife *Satī*.

Among the sensual Olympian gods, the seductive goddess of beauty and love, Venus, and the god of blacksmithing, Vulcan, marked by a club foot, lead a kind of open marriage. The myth attributes various flings to both of them. The most famous is the affair between Venus and the god of war Mars. The cuckolded husband catches the two lovers in flagrante with the help of a net he has hidden and summons the entire assembly of gods, who burst into unending laughter: the famous “Homeric laughter,” so called because the poet Homer describes the scene fully twice, in his *Iliad* and in his *Odyssey*.



Ganesha | Guledgudda, Karnataka, India | before 1856 |
wood, pigments, mirror, metal | 53.5 × 36.5 × 25 cm |
MKB, consigned by missionary Johann Gottlieb Kies 1856,
coll. Basler Mission, deposited 1981, gift 2015, Ila 8886

Charles André (Carle) van Loo (1705–1765) |
Venus with Cupids Carrying the Arms of Mars | Paris | c. 1743 |
oil on canvas | 126 × 103 cm | KMB, Birmann Collection 1859,
Inv. 619

Good Fate thanks to Divine Assistance

The Hindu deity *Ganesha* is presented as a very approachable, humorous, playful and mischievous character who promises good fortune and is therefore invoked by believers for almost all major undertakings. He is not only the god of businessmen; his main task is to remove obstacles on the way to salvation (*moksha*).

The triangular relationship between Vulcan, Venus and Mars (see the grouping before) has practical implications for humanity: the goddess of love and beauty asks her husband to make weapons and armor in his forge for her lover, the god of war. While in the painting's background Vulcan works at the sparking forge, Venus attentively examines his products destined for Mars. The cupids, mythological multiplications of Cupid who deliver Mars' handiwork, look skeptical, almost pleading; they remind the goddess of the mischief caused by every armament. Venus will therefore have a moderating effect on Mars and the power of love will transform a god of war into a bringer of peace. This is indicated by the pair of billing doves, which on the one hand allude to the love affair between Mars and Venus, and on the other symbolize peace.



Dewi Sri | Bali, Indonesia | before 1974 | wood |
45.5 × 10 × 8.5 cm | MKB, Urs Ramseyer coll.,
acquired on a field trip 1974, Ilc 17069

Formerly attributed to Gérard de Lairesse (1640–1711) |
Bacchus and Pomona | Netherlands | c. 1700 | oil on oak |
25.5 × 21 cm | KMB, Birmann Collection 1859, Inv. 403

In Tune with Nature?

Dewi Sri is not only the goddess of rice, she is also the deified rice plant itself. If regular sacrifices are made to her and the rice plant is cared for and nurtured like a growing human being, *Dewi Sri* guarantees fertility and well-being of the people of Bali.

In contrast, the Greco-Roman deities appear in the painter's imagination more as representatives of consumers. Pomona, the Roman goddess of tree fruit (from Latin *pomum* = fruit), and Bacchus, the god of wine, are served here by putti bringing baskets and bowls lavishly filled with vines and various fruits. The bare torsos of the maenads surrounding the ivy-wreathed god suggest the *bacchanalia*, the orgiastic feasts celebrated in his honor.



The transcendent Buddha *Vajradhara* with his female companion *Vajrayogini* | Tibet | c. 1500/50 | copper, brass, hollow cast | 38.5 × 27 × 18 cm | MKB, Gerd-Wolfgang Essen coll., acquired 1998, Ild 13875

Hans Bock the Elder (c. 1550/52–1624) after Hans Holbein the Younger | The Christchild on the Serpent | Basel | before 1587 | oil on limewood | 35 × 27.5 cm | KMB, Amerbach Cabinet 1662, Inv. 91

Polar Opposites Entwined

Shown here is the transcendent Buddha *Vajradhara*, in *yab-yum*, i.e. in father-mother position, thus in tantric union with his partner *Vajrayogini*. Its symbolism takes up the idea of duality union. The moment of enlightenment is characterized by the fact that the dualities, symbolically represented by man and woman, are transcended. It is a tantric representation of *sambhogakaya*, that is, appearances that are created only in meditation.

The Christ Child (copied from the Solothurn Madonna by Hans Holbein the Younger) is apostrophized here as the overcomer of original sin by the addition of a serpent on which he sits, an example of typical post-Reformation iconography. In contrast to the Vulgate Bible, Luther and Zwingli translated the subject in the cursing of the serpent from Genesis 3:15 as masculine: “The same shall bruise thy head,” a reference that was interpreted as pointing to Christ.

Thus, a quite tangible confrontation is evoked here between salvation and sinfulness, i.e. ultimately between the conflicting principles of good and evil—with the victory of the former.



Altar of the goddess *Kālī* | India | end of the 20th c. |
wood, plaster, pigments, cardboard, paper, plastic beads,
metal foil, synthetic hair | 220 × 127 × 65 cm | MKB,
Museum Kunstpalast Düsseldorf, gift 2012, Ila 11493

Adriaen van Stalbeem (1580–1662) | Mercury Abducting
the Deity Contento | Antwerp | c. 1607/09 | oil on oak |
38.1 × 59.9 cm | KMB, Dienast Collection,
gift of Emilie Linder 1850, Inv. 207

Change, Transformation, Modification

A Hindu myth: The goddess *Kālī* once danced on the battlefield, drunk on the blood of her enemies, and to stop her raving, *Shiva* lay down like a corpse. Only when *Kālī* danced on him, she recognized her husband and stopped. She stuck out her tongue in shock and shame at her own behavior.

The two deities embody ambivalent principles and form an inseparable unit as a couple in love or even married. These kinds of altars are made on the occasion of the sacrificial feast *Kālī-Puja* and after the event they are sunk in the river, e.g. in the Brahmaputra. Since they are made of unfired clay, they dissolve in the water.

The painting thematizes a literary art myth from the picaresque novel “Guzman de Alfarache” by Mateo Alemán from 1599: The ancients worship Contento, the deity of happiness, more than other gods, which makes Jupiter so jealous that he orders Mercury to replace Contento with his twin brother Discontento: Dissatisfaction replaces Happiness!

Surprisingly, Contento is described in the novel as a god or a goddess—Alemán explicitly mentions both alternatives—and is here depicted by the painter as a goddess. Grammatical and natural gender are thus by no means congruent.



Made Budi (*1932) | *Hanuman Trying to Devour the Sun* | Batuan, Bali, Indonesia | c. 1970 | acrylic on canvas | 85 × 37 cm | MKB, Urs Ramseyer coll., acquired on a field trip 1975, Ilc 17861

Urs Graf (c. 1485–1527/28) | *The Wild Host* | Basel | c. 1513/15 | varnished tempera on paper, somewhat later pasted on limewood and framed | 27.3 × 17.2 cm | KMB, Amerbach Cabinet 1662, Inv. 258

Metaphysical Air Battles

In the *Batuan* artistic style of Bali, Made Budi reproduces the Hindu myth of how the monkey child *Hanuman* got his name: When *Hanuman's* mother went away one day, she advised him to eat red fruit when he was hungry. When *Hanuman* stepped outside his hut the next morning, he saw the rising sun. Since he was very hungry, he thought he would get his fill faster from the big, red sun than from many small fruits. And so he flew towards the sun, intending to eat it. When the sun god *Surya* saw *Hanuman* flying purposefully towards him, he called on the god Indra for help. But even Indra could not stop *Hanuman* and so he shot a thunderbolt at him. Hit on the chin, Hanuman fell to the earth. His name means “the one with the deformed jaw”. Later he became general of the monkey army and defeated the demon army of *Ravana* in the Indian *Ramayana* epic.

Basilius Amerbach described the small picture in 1587 in the inventory of his collections as follows: “Ein nackender man vnd fraw in wolcken, sampt Wütisheer”. The angry or wild host (Wütisheer) is a ghost army of those executed or killed during a war. In this conception, motifs from folk tales mix with elements of the Christian doctrine of hell and here perhaps also with ideas from antiquity, if one sees in the main figures the war deities Mars (with fire basin) and Bellona (with hand grenade). The work is probably meant to be an allegory of war with all its horrors, that Urs Graf had experienced himself as a soldier, for example in the Battle of Marignano in 1515, in which the Confederates were crushingly defeated by the French in the battle for the Duchy of Milan.



Brought forth from the Womb...



Das Bild zeigt eine Szene aus dem Leben eines Bauernhofes. In der Mitte steht ein Mann in einem braunen Mantel, der einen Korb auf dem Kopf hat. Er ist von einem Pferd umgeben, das einen Wagen mit einem Dachziegelziegelzug zieht. Im Hintergrund sind weitere Gebäude und eine Landschaft zu sehen. Die Farbpalette ist gedämpft und erdtonig, was die ländliche Atmosphäre unterstreicht.

Titel des Bildes

Das Bild ist ein Beispiel für die Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts, die sich mit dem Leben der einfachen Leute auseinandersetzt. Es zeigt die harte Arbeit und die Verbindung zwischen Mensch und Tier in der Landwirtschaft. Die Komposition ist sorgfältig angelegt, um die zentralen Figuren und die Handlung zu betonen.

Die Verwendung von warmen Farben wie Braun, Gelb und Rot verleiht dem Bild eine intime und zeitlose Qualität. Die Details der Kleidung und des Wagens sind sorgfältig gezeichnet, was auf eine hohe handwerkliche Fertigkeit des Künstlers hinweist.

Das Bild ist ein wertvolles Dokument der ländlichen Kultur und bietet einen Einblick in die Lebensbedingungen der Bauern zu jener Zeit. Es ist ein Beispiel für die soziale Realismus, der sich in der Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts manifestierte.



Ndolo (carver) | mask *mbaala* | Kabangu, Democratic Republic of the Congo | before 1938 | wood, plant fibres, pigments | 54 × 54 × 45 cm | MKB, Hans Himmelheber coll., acquired 1938, III 1336

South German Master | The Nativity | c. 1420 | oil and tempera on fir wood | 26.5 × 20 cm | MKB, gift of the Prof. J.J. Bachofen-Burckhardt-Foundation 2015, Inv. 1333

Vitrine shrine (*Eingericht*) with wax figure of a child | Zug, Switzerland | 18th/19th c. | wax, glass, artificial flowers, paper, textiles, metal wire | 24 × 20 × 11 cm | MKB, Jakob Lörch, acquired 1914, VI 6255

Coming into this World

The center of this mask is a carved birth scene: between the woman's legs, the child's head emerges at the bottom. Such masks appeared at the end of the camps of young men of the *Yaka* for their initiation into manhood. They often showed scenes involving sexuality and reproduction. The initiation was supposed to create the conditions for the novices to become good fathers with healthy descendants.

Since the late Middle Ages, Christian art has offered men a concrete role model for this: Joseph, the foster father of Jesus. In this painting, he dries the newborn's diaper by the fire; in others, he even sacrifices his own trousers by cutting them up to fabricate the urgently needed garment. Also a porridge kept warm by the fire fills the clay jug. The necessity of baby food and diapers strikingly illustrates the one hundred percent human nature of the newborn Jesus in the sense of the two-natures doctrine, a theological concept as central as it is popular.

Therefore, in the 18th or 19th century, a baby-like wax doll, devoid of any sacred attributes, was sufficient to commemorate the birth of Christ. Of course, it is bedded on fine lace, and floral decorations suggest a paradisiacal garden. And to support the association with the incarnate Savior, the whole conglomerate is artfully placed in a glass container, reminiscent of an ostensory for relics or a monstrance for the Eucharist.



...and other Transitions



Christus in der Auferstehung
1850
Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin



Die Auferstehung Christi
1850
Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin



Das Bild zeigt eine Stillleben-Szene mit verschiedenen Objekten auf einem Tisch. In der Mitte befindet sich ein gelber Becher, daneben ein weißes Gefäß und ein braunes Gefäß. Rechts ist ein rotes Objekt zu sehen. Die Szene ist auf einem dunklen Hintergrund dargestellt.

Titel: Stillleben mit gelbem Becher

Maße: 100 cm x 100 cm

Material: Öl auf Leinwand

Zeitraum: 17. Jahrhundert

Ort: Museum für Kunst und Geschichte, Berlin

Ritual device *angenan* | Bali, Indonesia | late 20th c. |
yarn, eggshell, wood | 47.5 × 9 × 12 cm |
MKB, Werner Gamper coll., gift 2017, Ilc 22672

Attributed to Hieronymus II. Francken (1578–1623) |
Still Life with Riches and the Death of a Miser | Antwerp |
c. 1600 | oil on oak | 51.5 × 61.5 cm | KMB, long term loan
of the Stiftung zur Förderung niederländischer Kunst
in Basel 2006, Inv. G 2006.13

Transmigration of Souls

The Balinese term *angenan* means “spirit/feeling/soul”. The inconspicuous ritual device indicates to the bereaved the presence of the wandering soul of the deceased. If the little lamp made of a blown-out egg goes out, the soul has begun its journey.

On the other hand, the devils on the panel from Antwerp—at that time the most important capital of world trade—proceed in an exceedingly businesslike manner at the deathbed of a person, apparently a very rich one to judge from the display in the foreground. The sealed document presented by them should document that the dying man has pledged his soul to them in exchange for local success. Now his soul will have to make its way to hell in the company of the demonic beings.



Verre églomisé (back-painted and etched glass) *Memento Mori* | Toggenburg, Switzerland | c. 1820 | glass, metal foil, pigment, wood | 22 × 31 × 2.2 cm | MKB, Albert Steiger, acquired 1918, VI 8057

Hans Baldung Grien (1484/85–1545) | *Death and the Maiden* | Strassburg | 1517 | oil and tempera on limewood | 30.3 × 14.7 cm | KMB, Faesch Museum 1823, Inv. 18

The Dead as Admonisher and the Admonishing Death

The reclining skeleton holds an expiring hourglass in its hand and is surrounded by other objects that symbolize death: a scythe, a quiver with arrows, an extinguishing candle. This composition is intended to dramatically demonstrate to the viewer his or her own transience or *vanitas*. In the admonishing poem below, the skeleton depicted reveals itself to be that of a deceased person who is addressing us directly:

*“Here I lie friend and am decayed
what you are, I was also
Consider me well on this earth
what I am you must also one day become.”*

The already decomposing corpse can, however, also embody death itself: On Baldung’s panel he grabs a young woman by the hair and wants to carry her into the grave dug on the left. His pointing gesture towards the pit addresses her, who seems to be in the prime of her life, but at the same time us, too. Death reinforces his gesture with his words in the inscription at the top:

«HIE • MV°ST • DU • YN» (*Here you must go*)



School of Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553) |
The Resurrection of Christ and his Triumph over Death and
the Devil | Wittenberg | 1537 | oil on panel | 64 × 57 cm |
KMB, acquisition 1907, Inv. 180

Chromolithographs *Von Gott* and *Zu Gott* | Verlag des
Sonntagsgrusses 'Himmelan', Constance, Germany resp.
Evangelische Buchhandlung Emmishofen, Switzerland |
c. 1910 | oil print on paper | 60 × 44 cm each | MKB, oldest
funds, VI 46602 – 46603

A Theological Concept Becomes Fodder for a Fairy Tale

The Lord's work of redemption does not only bring resurrection to Himself: His death on the cross also redeems mankind from original sin. This is symbolized on the panel from the School of Cranach the Elder by Christ's triumph over death and the devil throughout the globe.

From then on, the Christian expectation of afterlife contained the promise that we come from God and return to him, provided that we lived a life pleasing to him. In the case of children who died at an early age, the latter condition is superfluous. The mass-produced print *Zu Gott* (To God) reproduces an invention by Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1805–1874), which he had created as an illustration for Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale «The Angel», where it says at the beginning:

“Every time a good child dies, an angel of God comes down to earth, takes the dead child in his arms, spreads his great white wings and picks a whole handful of flowers, which he brings up to God so that they may bloom there even more beautifully than on earth.”

Kaulbach's drawing was later published, labeled *Ewige Heimat* (Eternal Homeland), together with other cartoons by the artist for King Ludwig II under the title *Kaulbach-Galerie*. The highly popular subject was accompanied by the publisher's counterpart *Von Gott* (From God) after an unknown model. At that time, the iconography of angels transporting souls was promoted above all by a monumental picture-text cycle in 18 paintings and 2,800 verses that had been a show-stopper at the 1855 World's Fair: Louis Janmot's *Poème de l'âme* (Poem of the Soul) in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon.



Thangka (Buddhist scroll painting) *Abhirati, the Eastern Paradise of Buddha Akshobhya* | Tibet | 19th c. | distemper on canvas | 118 × 77 × 4.2 cm | MKB, Gerd-Wolfgang Essen coll., acquired 1998, Ild 13852

Franz Anton Maulbertsch (1724–1796) | *The Ascension of the Virgin*. Model for the painting on the high altar of the church of the Cistercian convent Altmünster in Mainz | Vienna | c. 1757/58 | oil on canvas | 64 × 37 cm | KMB, gift of Gottlieb Lüthy 1936, Inv. 1663

Nowhere, Somewhere

The “Pure Land”, the Buddha Paradise of the transcendent Buddha *Akshobhya*, is located somewhere in the east of the universe, suggesting that the “Pure Lands” mean rather placeless states of existence. Buddha Paradises are spiritual places that can be experienced in meditation. Practitioners of this religion hope to be reborn in one of the five Buddha Paradises. From there, the exit from the cycle of rebirths, which is perceived as suffering, is virtually guaranteed.

The Christian heaven, into which Mary ascends according to extra-biblical but generally accepted tradition, implicitly lies somewhere above our heads, in the direction of the visible sky. That is why the subject is a favorite theme in Baroque sacred painting, ideal for the towering altarpieces of the time. The altarpiece executed after our model (today in St. Quentin in Mainz) measures over seven meters in height.

The idea of the *empyreum* as the seat of the Mother of God and all the saints, which prevailed at that time, is extremely complex. This unstruck and cloudless, eternally unchanging third heaven, to be located directly below the zone in which the Holy Trinity resides, is a *coelum superintelletuale*, a sphere beyond the other two heavens, the natural and the spiritual, inaccessible to human knowledge.



Thangka (Buddhist scroll painting) *Sukhāvātī, the Western Paradise of Buddha Amitābha* | Tibet | 17th c. | distemper on canvas, brocade, silk, cotton, wood, metal, and others | 114 × 81 × 3 cm | MKB, Gerd-Wolfgang Essen coll., acquired 1998, IId 13850

Cornelis van Poelenburgh (1594/95–1667) | *Psyche Carried by Hermes to Mount Olympus* | Rome or Utrecht | c. 1624 | oil on oak | 40 × 70.5 cm | KMB, gift of an art lover 1853, Inv. 489

Happy Endings

The “Pure Land” *Sukhāvātī* is the paradise of the Buddha *Amida* or *Amitābha*, created at his enlightenment. Followers of *Amida* Buddhism hope to be reborn there. Rebirth in one of the Buddha paradises holds the promise of finally being able to leave the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*), which is perceived as suffering.

The beautiful princess *Psyche* is brought to mount Olympus by the messenger god *Hermes* (Roman: *Mercury*) at the request of her divine lover *Cupid*. She is going to be finally accepted among the immortals, and nothing will stand in the way of the two lovers' wedding.



Thangka (Buddhist scroll painting) *Shambala, the Northern Paradise and Empire* | Tibet | end of the 18th c. | distemper on canvas, brocade, silk, wood, metal, leather | 133 × 90.5 × 3 cm | MKB, Gerd-Wolfgang Essen coll., acquired 1998, Ild 13853

Attributed to Hans Rottenhammer the Elder (1564/65–1625) | *The Last Judgement* | c. 1600 | oil on copper | 57 × 45.5 cm | KMB, Birmann Collection 1859, Inv. 459

At the End of Time

According to Buddhist tradition in Tibet, the mythical kingdom of *Shambala* exists in northern Asia and its 25th king will one day free the world from the rule of the dark armies and usher in the new Golden Age of peace and happiness. It first became known in the West mainly through the adaptations of Theosophy. It is a mythical realm and, like the Buddha paradises of *Abhirati* and *Sukhavati*, more a state of consciousness than a real place.

Christian eschatology (the doctrine of the last things after life and death) focuses on the Last Judgment as a prerequisite for the establishment of the eternal Kingdom of God. The returned Christ judges all the living and dead of human history, whom he irrevocably either receives into heaven or condemns to the eternal torment of hell. To do justice to the immense scope of this judgment, Christian art imagined the process in highly dramatic and extremely figurative compositions as in this example.



Absence of the Gods



Winged Eros
The marble statue of Eros, the Greek god of love, is a masterpiece of Hellenistic sculpture. It is a full-length figure of a young man with large, feathered wings, standing on a rectangular base. The figure is nude, with a draped garment over his left shoulder. He is holding a small object in his right hand, which is raised towards his head. The statue is made of white marble and is displayed in a gallery setting.



Ferdinand Schlöth (1818–1891) | Psyche | Basel and Lutzenberg AR | 1882 | marble | 149 × 75 × 60 cm | Skulpturhalle Basel, long term loan of the Basler Kunstverein

Seat of a God *palinggihan* shaped as a sacrificial lodge *sanggah* | Klungkung, Bali, Indonesia | before 1974 | wood | 25 × 7 × 7 cm | MKB, Urs Ramseyer coll., acquired on a field trip 1974, Ilc 17603

When the God Has Gone

Princess Psyche's lover insists on meeting her only in the dark and remaining unrecognized. However, instigated by her envious sisters, the doubting king's daughter looks after her bedfellow one night with an oil lamp, sees the beautiful Cupid boy and accidentally wakes him up with dripping hot oil. Outraged by the betrayal, the god of love flees; and Psyche wanders lonely and abandoned, seeking him "among all peoples". A long odyssey begins—which of course leads to a happy end (see grouping in the previous room).

In Bali, it is taken for granted that deities come to earth only on certain occasions. People then place containers, usually in the form of small statues, in their respective shrines and the deities sit in them and attend the festivities. A large part of the time, the vessels are «empty» and the deities are absent.



Model of a Lotus Throne *padmasana* | Bali, Indonesia |
before 1974 | wood | 35.5 × 8 × 11.5 cm | MKB, Urs Ramseyer
coll., acquired on a field trip 1974, Ilc 17085

Ambrosius Skeit | The Circumcision of Christ | Swabia | 1503 |
oil and tempera on fir | 52 × 31.5 cm | KMB, gift of the
Prof. J.J. Bachofen-Burckhardt-Foundation 2015, Inv. 1237 b

Seat Reservation

A lotus throne (*padmasana*) is an often huge sanctuary in the form of a richly decorated unoccupied throne in Balinese Hindu temples. This is reserved for *Acintya*, the supreme, omnipotent and unimaginable deity, as a seat when the deities visit the temples on the occasion of festivals.

In the Jewish rite, at the *Brit Milah*, the circumcision ceremony, an empty throne or decorated chair is provided on which the newborn is briefly placed. It is the symbolic seat of the prophet Elijah, whose witness is evoked at each circumcision.

Very few Christian artists, who of course regularly had to depict a circumcision, namely that of the new born Jesus, knew about this peculiarity: Ambrosius Skeit is one of those exceptional artists. The fact that the painter also correctly adds the necessary assistant figures to the high priest, the *mohel* (circumciser) and the *sandek* (a kind of godfather who presents the child), confirms a certain familiarity with the culture of Judaism.



Shadow Puppet *Acintya* (the Unimaginable), *Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa* (the Almighty) or *Sang Hyang Tunggal* (the Only One) | Bali, Indonesia | before 1974 | animal skin, pigments, wood | 57.5 × 23 × 1.5 cm | MKB, Werner Gamper coll., gift 2017, Ilc 23353

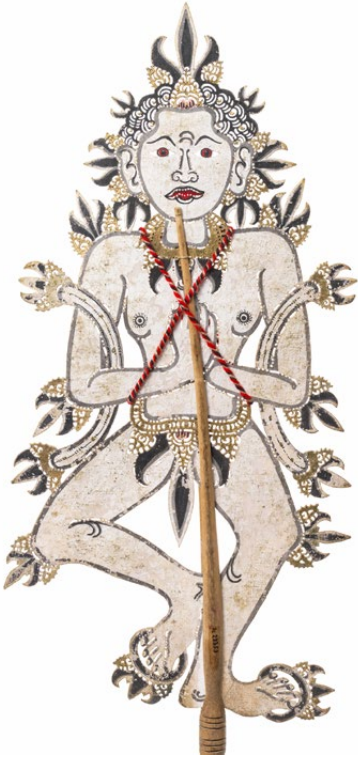
Workshop of Leonardo da Vinci, perhaps Marco d'Oggiono (1475–c. 1530) | Saint John the Baptist | Milan | c. 1505/07 | oil on poplar | 71 × 52 cm | KMB, bequest of Dr. Fritz Sarasin 1942, Inv. 1879

Substitute

Acintya is the monistic principle of the Hindu-Balinese religion. *Acintya* is inconceivable and unimaginable, the emptiness and at the same time the origin of the universe. All other deities originate from *Acintya*. Often *Acintya* is not represented at all, only an empty lotus throne points to his existence.

John the Baptist fights against misunderstandings: “But when the people were delirious and thought in their hearts about John, whether he might be Christ” (Luke 3:15), he clarifies: “I am not Christ” (John 1:20), “He it is who will come after me, who was before me” (John 1:27) and “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Jesus returns the favor by apostrophizing John as the greatest among the woman-born, but the least in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 11:11). With the help of such metaphorical oxymorons, the Bible describes the complex relationship between the two protagonists. Obviously, visualizing this is not easy.

Leonardo da Vinci came up with a solution of ingenious simplicity that has been copied many times, and rightly so: the figure of the youthful Precursor emerging from the darkness, who quite literally points beyond himself at something—again in the literal sense of the word—higher, namely above the image and thus beyond what can be depicted.



Back to the Origins





Hans Bock the Elder (c. 1550/52–1624) | Allegory of Day |
Basel | 1586 | oil on limewood | 80.6 × 82 cm |
KMB, Amerbach Cabinet 1662, Inv. 85

Relief *Churning the Milk Ocean* | India | before 1990 | wood,
pigments | 15.5 × 128 × 11.5 cm | MKB, Friedrich Seltmann
coll., gift 2006, Ila 11433

Supernatural Conflicts

The relief depicts a Hindu myth, handed down in the *Puranas* (sacred scriptures, written around 400–1000). *Vishnu* in his incarnation as a turtle lifts Mount *Mandara* out of the sea of milk and thus saves the world. The mortal gods and demons join forces on *Vishnu*'s advice to extract the immortality potion *Amrita* from the ocean of milk. The serpent *Vasuki* is coiled around Mount *Mandara*, by whose tail the gods and by whose head the demons alternately pull, thus whirling the ocean. By a trick of *Vishnu*, who as a pretty young woman is supposed to distribute the immortality potion to all, gods as well as demons, the demons go empty-handed and only the gods are immortal from this moment on.

Hans Bock equates the allegory of the dawning day in the foreground, i.e. the beginning of time as such, with the Titanomachy in the background. This is an eleven-year battle between two generations of gods (Titans under Kronos against Olympians under Zeus). All this takes place even before the emergence of mankind and is described by Hesiod (7th century B.C.) in his *Theogony*.





Ancestor figure | Asmat, Lorentz River, Papua, Indonesia |
before 1923 | wood | 85.5 × 9 × 15 cm | MKB, Paul Wirz coll.,
gift 1923, Vb 6107

Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617) | Hermes presenting Pandora
to King Epimetheus | Haarlem | 1611 | oil on canvas |
181 × 256.8 cm | KMB, Birmann Collection 1859, Inv. 252

The Man-creating Craftsman-god

In the imagination of the *Asmat*, *Fumeripitsj* created people by animating carved wooden figures. *Fumeripitsj* beat the drum, whereupon the figures, joined at the knees and elbows, unfolded and began to live and dance.

The revenge of the Olympian gods for being outwitted by the Titan Prometheus, who stole fire from the Olympians for humankind's benefit, is ingenious. Hephaistos (or Vulcan in the Roman tradition), the god of the forge, creates from clay a female artificial being named Pandora, and the messenger god Hermes (Roman: Mercury) leads her to Prometheus' brother, the king Epimetheus, who marries the beautiful woman, although he has been warned against it. In the end, she opens her proverbial box from which all evils of the world escape. At the bottom of the box, however, remains one item: hope.

On Goltzius' large allegorical canvas, Pandora rests in seductive nudity to the right of the throne of the king, who is receiving Hermes. The latter hides his attribute, the staff called *caduceus*, behind his back, in order not to be recognized as a god, since this could expose the cabal.



Figure of a mythical female creator | Inyai-Ewa, Korewori River, Middle Sepik, Papua-New Guinea | before 1968 | wood, pigments | 148 × 46 × 9 cm | MKB, Maurice Bonnefoy coll., acquired 1971, Vb 25453

Jean Arp (1886–1966) | Torse préadamite | Clamart | 1938 | rose limestone | 48.5 × 36.5 × 29.5 cm | KMB, gift of Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach in memory of Jean Arp 1966, Inv. G 1966.14

Earth Women

To commemorate the reclamation of the earth, the *Inyai* made carved figures. This one possibly represents one of the two mythical sisters who made the earth's surface habitable for humans and discovered the sago palm.

Arp's "pre-Adamite torso" is based on the swelling forms of Neolithic female fertility statuettes such as the "Venus of Malta" (National Museum of Archaeology of Malta, La Valetta), freshly published at the time the sculpture was made.



**Candleholder in the shape of the tree of life | Metepec,
Estado de Mexico, Mexico | 1962 | clay, aniline colors |
78 × 65 × 22 cm | MKB, Heidi and Kay C. Hansen coll.,
acquired 1965, IVb 2883**

**Contemporary imitator of Jan Brueghel the Elder
(1568–1625) | Adam and Eve in Paradise | Antwerp | 17th c. |
oil on canvas | 64.5 × 93 cm | KMB, Noetzlin-Werthemann
Bequest 1928, Inv. 1498**

Paradise I: Panoramic and Idyllic

The immensely luxuriant plant with the outline of a mandorla is the tree of life (*arbol de la vida* in Spanish), which, according to Genesis 2:9, together with the tree of knowledge, occupies the center of paradise. After eating a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, which makes Adam and Eve distinguish between good and evil, the first humans are expelled from the Garden of Eden, lest they also reach for the fruit of the Tree of Life, which would give them immortality.

Mexican trees of life typically come from Metepec. They are usually decorated with flowers, leaves and biblical figures, especially Adam and Eve, snake and apple, highlighted in red. Their design combines pre-Hispanic and Christian elements. In the pre-Hispanic cultures of Mexico, trees (e.g. *ceiba*) played an important role as life-givers, as a symbol of fertility or as the world's *axis mundi*.

As richly as the sculptors from Metepec decorated their trees of life, the Baroque painters also furnished the Garden of Eden they imagined. Here the trees of life and knowledge are on the left, where the forest grows most densely. On the right, the stream of paradise (Genesis 2:10) winds through a gentle hilly landscape with freestanding trees, meadows and shrubbery. Corresponding to the idyllic flora is a fauna extremely rich in species, with nearly every genus occurring in pairs so that it is capable of reproduction. Elephant, dromedaries, giraffes and even two unicorns cavort in the clearing in the middle ground.



Figure group *Adam and Eve with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* | Metepec, Estado de Mexico, Mexico | before 1961 | clay, aniline colors | 40 × 14 × 10 cm | 39 × 14 × 9.5 cm | 48 × 16 × 17 cm | MKB, Domus, Kornfeld & Co., acquired 1961, IVb 2596a-c

Hans Holbein the Younger (c. 1497/98–1543) | *Adam and Eve* | Basel | 1517 | oil on paper, pasted on a fir panel (presumably later) | 30 × 35.5 cm | KMB, Amerbach Cabinet 1662, Inv. 313

Paradise II: Zoom in on the Protagonists

The actual fall of man, detached from the vegetal decoration of the tree of life, is also a frequent motif of the sculptors from Metepec, Mexico, who combine indigenous with Christian motifs. Metepec is now one of the best known places for the production of groups of figures and trees of life in clay. They are largely made in family studios. Artists shape the clay with plaster and ceramic models as well as freely by hand. Sculpting can be done around a core of wire for better support. Once all the appliqués are in place, the clay is dried and fired. Finally, the ceramics are cold painted.

An even more astonishing close-up of the event is provided by Hans Holbein in this still enigmatic early work. Adam and Eve, the former intimately embracing the latter, appear as busts and extremely close-up. The *corpus delicti* of the apple, the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, presents the primordial mother in the foremost picture plane, so close-up that we become aware of the bite marks left by her teeth visible in her open mouth.



Johann Heinrich Füssli (1741–1825) | Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise | London | 1802 | oil on canvas | 92 × 71 cm | KMB, long term loan from a Swiss private collection

Payas (Pierre Sylvain Agustin) (*1941) | The Fall of Adam and Eve | Haiti | before 2000 | oil on canvas | 76 × 101 cm | MKB, Marlyse and Heinrich Thommen-Strasser coll., gift 2019, IVc 26977

Paradise III: A Bad End—a New Beginning

Using Mannerist body schemes and gesture apparatus, while adhering to the figural ideal of ancient nudity (in actual contradiction to the narrative, see below), Füssli depicts a moment of extreme despondency: the fallen primal couple leaves the Garden of Eden; the archangel with the flaming sword dramatically commands the garden's sealing for eternity. Adam supports Eve, who is close to collapse; the latter is seemingly inconsolable, however.

Abandoning spatial perspective and in a bold leap in time between the story of creation and the New Testament, Payas stages his paradise after the Fall. In the foreground he shows Adam and Eve wearing bright green skirts around their waists—probably in reference to the aprons made of fig leaves (Genesis 3:7), which according to the Bible should have been replaced here by garments of fur (Genesis 3:21). Behind them rises in radiant white “The Lord of Order” with the stigmata of the risen Christ. His gesture appears threatening (expulsion from paradise), but at the same time also protective (redemptive work of the Messiah). The fact that Adam and he perform the same movement of both arms down to the last detail lends him something thoroughly human. The ultimate overcoming of original sin is also emphasized by the serpent apparently sinking to the ground on its back.



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