

Lady Gaga performs at the museum

The exhibition “Bhima, Mr Punch, and the Demon” at the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) takes viewers on a journey to the epic world of the puppet theatre and shines the spotlight on its fascinating inhabitants: puppets, marionettes, and shadow play figures.

Bhima is the son of a king and hero of the Mahabharata, one of the greatest epics in Indian literature. Together with his four brothers, Bhima defeats the forces of his 100 evil cousins. His special hallmark: his claw-like thumbnails.

Together with the Ramayana, the other great Indian folk epic, the Mahabharata was carried to many regions in Asia with the spread of Hinduism. The rod puppet Bhima, which plays a major part in the new exhibition at MKB, originated in Java – and is part of the Gamper collection.

Curator Richard Kunz took the occasion of the donation of the Gamper collection, numbering 2,500 objects, to stage an exhibition on puppet theatres. This form of theatre is widespread across the world and cherished by young and old alike. In Java, Indonesia, the rod puppet theatre *wayang golek* is extremely popular, and some of the puppeteers actually enjoy superstar status. In the exhibition, videos provide insight into their art.

Puppet masters continue to develop the art of puppetry. One example is Catur Kuncoro’s “Wayang Hip Hop”. Some of his creations are being flown in specially for the show, among them Lady Gaga.

Richard Kunz was also able to draw on the large collection of puppets and figures held by MKB. His selection fell on a host of beautiful rod and hand puppets, shadow play figures, and marionettes from Asia and Europe, many of them from the Gamper collection.

Just like the puppet theatre itself, the exhibition focusses on the above mentioned great Indian epics along with the Chinese classic novel Journey to the West. – Excerpts are available at listening stations. – Key scenes from the narratives will be enacted with the help of some of the main figures. The strongly stylized characters allow puppeteers not only to entertain the audience but also to depict the world and society with all their flaws and address ethical issues.

The various European puppet theatres as well as the Turkish Karagöz theatre are also built around recurring main characters. They, too, feature prominently in the exhibition. A special light is shone on the clowns and demons – two categories of figures that make up part of every puppet theatre. The demons always lose out against the good guys. On the one hand, the clowns are comic entertainers and trusted servants, on the other, they embody critical voices who hold up a mirror to their audience.

Visitors are invited to give it a try as puppeteers at the hands-on station. A storybook for children complements the exhibition which is on until 2 August 2020.