

Tree of life

Trees are existential for people. They provide oxygen and food, wood and shadow; they connect heaven and earth, underworld and upper world. Large trees often form the center of villages and are places of assembly. Trees are powerful protagonists. They stand for life, community and the cosmos. Certain trees receive respect and reverence.

The Christmas tree has been embellished with lights to celebrate the festive season since the 16th century. In former times in Europe, evergreen branches were taken from the forest for the winter solstice on December 21st. They stood for vitality and encouraged hope for the return of spring.

The tree of life in Mexico combines the biblical story of the tree of knowledge with indigenous notions of the cosmic tree from which life emerges. In the form of candle holders, it is a common gift to newly-married couples. It is also carried in processions at the summer solstice.

The world tree is one of the most important figures in Indonesian puppet theater. It represents the cosmic order and central values. It is often a combination of a fig tree and a lotus, linking creativity and fire with purity and perfection.

The exhibition brings together diverse representations from the MKB collection and contemporary images of the relationship between trees and people. Author and photographer Zora del Buono has visited the oldest and largest living beings in Europe and North America. She is asking: What would trees tell us if they could speak?

“When we listen to trees [...] we learn how to inhabit the relationships that give life its source, substance and beauty.” David George Haskell 2017

Christmas tree

Firs were considered sacred trees long before they became Christmas trees. On the winter solstice on December 21st, in agrarian societies of Central Europe, it was common to gather evergreen branches from the forest. These were used to welcome the light, warmth and energy of the sun. They strengthened the hope for the return of spring.

This fir tree is being decorated by angels for Christmas.

1 Music box with Christmas tree and the melody “O Tannenbaum”, folk art from the Ore Mountains, Seiffen; Richard Gläser GmbH, Seiffen, Germany | 1999 | wood, metal, paint | on loan from Ulrike Storni

2 Pyramid with fir tree, snowmen and Santa Claus, Seiffener Pyramidenhaus Geschwister Stephani OHG, Seiffen, Germany | 2023 | wood, metal, paint | on loan from Roland Paul

In German-speaking countries, Christmas trees have been decorated since the 16th century. The Christmas tree represents the «tree of paradise». In the beginning, the tree was embellished with apples and sweets, later also with candles. Their light symbolizes the birth of Christ.

Light pyramids come from the Ore Mountains (ger. Erzgebirge). Since the 19th century, they are illuminating the long winter evenings during the Advent and Christmas season.

- 3 Pyramid with Christmas tree and angels, VEB folk art from the Ore Mountains, Seiffen |ca. 1980 | Seiffen, Germany | wood, metal, color | S. & W. Roth Kunstgewerbe, gifted in 1997 | VI 68925

“When the little pyramid
quietly stirs its wings,
I feel how the great peace
lays its hands on me.”
Kurt Arnold Findeisen, 1955

- 4 Pyramid with Christmas tree and nativity scene by Harry Brauer | ca. 1950 | Berlin, Germany | wood, metal, cardboard, gold leaf, wax, paint | Vreni van den Berg, gifted in 1995 | VI 67718

Nowadays, the Christmas tree is popular all around the globe. It found its way to Mexico in the second half of the 19th century: Emperor Maximilian and his wife Carlota introduced it. In Mexico, the shape of the fir tree was fused with local variations of the blooming tree of life.

- 5 Christmas tree | before 1960 | Mexico | tinplate, color | Hans Peter His, legate 1972/74; Domus, Kornfeld & Co., purchased 1960 | H 0747
- 6 Christmas tree | 1962 | Mexico City, Mexico | Tinplate, color | Kay C. and Heidi Hansen, purchased 1965 | IVb 2636
- 7 Christmas tree | 1962 | Mexico City, Mexico | Tinplate, color | Kay C. and Heidi Hansen, purchased 1965 | IVb 2634
- 8 Christmas tree | 1962 | Mexico City, Mexico | Tinplate, color | Kay C. and Heidi Hansen, purchased 1965 | IVb 2635
- 9 Christmas tree | before 2014 | Oaxaca, Mexico | tinplate, paint | Collection Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 9244
- 10 Christmas tree | before 2014 | Oaxaca, Mexico | tinplate, paint | Collection Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 9245

Tree of awakening

Siddhartha Gautama meditated under a pipal tree for several weeks until he attained awakening (skt. bodhi): under the tree, he was granted liberation from the causes of suffering. The tree of awakening became a symbol of Buddhahood. To this day, it is a popular motif in Buddhist representations.

- 11 Buddha Shakyamuni under the pipal tree | 3rd – 6th century | Gandhara, Pakistan | stone | Paul Wirz, freiwilliger Museumsverein, permanent loan 1939 | IIa 832

Wish-fulfilling tree

The divine wish-fulfilling tree, kalpavriksha, connects in Tibetan Buddhism the middle world, inhabited by humans, with the celestial spheres as well as with the underworld, inhabited by jealous deities. The trunk forms the world axis and the crown the “Pure Land” where meditating practitioners hope to be reborn. The represented saints and Buddhas are considered as the fruits of the wish-fulfilling tree. For practitioners, the green tree embodies the meritorious pursuit of awakening.

- 12 *Tzogshing*, Thangka with a wish-fulfilling tree | 18th century | Tibet, China | silk damask, wood, metal, leather | Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, 1998 | IId 13861

Tree of long life

Even in the cold season, pine and bamboo remain green and plum trees sometimes already bloom under the snow. In China and Japan, they are also referred to as the “Three Friends of Winter”. They symbolize unbroken vitality and long life. At New Year, pine branches are attached to the front door. They carry blessings and wishes of happiness.

- 13 *uchikake*, kimono with pine, bamboo and plum motif | 19th century | Nihonjin, Japan | silk, relief embroidery | Luise and Jacques Brodbeck-Sandreuter, gifted in 1925 | IId 1353

Tree of life

The tree of life from Mexico connects the biblical story with indigenous worldviews. Its tall, upright trunk is reminiscent of the central axis of the cosmos. Plenty of leaves, flowers and fruits express live-giving force. At the foot of the tree or in its crown, one recognizes the Bible’s first couple. The seductive snake offers Adam and Eve the forbidden fruit of knowledge.

- 14 Tree of life, candle holder | 1962 | Metepec, Mexico ceramic, metal, aniline colors | Kay C. und Heidi Hansen, purchased 1965 | IVb 2883
- 15 Tree of life, candle holder | before 1960 | Metepec, Mexico | ceramic, metal, paint | Hans Peter His, bequest 1972–74; Domus, Kornfeld & Co., purchased 1960 | H 0791.01
- 16 Tree of life | before 1977 | Metepec, Mexico | ceramic, metal, aniline colors | Collection Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 8523
- 17 Tree of life | 1963 | Metepec, Mexico | ceramic, metal, aniline colors | Kay C. and Heidi Hansen, purchased 1965 | IVb 2870

Ritual ceramic art and family-run potteries in Metepec date back to pre-colonial times. In the 1930s, Modesta Fernandez Mata became known for her innovative motifs and representations. She painted her figures with luminous aniline and acrylic colors. Contacts and exchanges with artists and collectors such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo inspired her work. At the same time, Mexican cultural policy began to promote arts and crafts as a source of income. This policy promoted the fusion of indigenous and European values to create a Mexican national identity.

- 18 Tree of life, Modesta Fernandez Mata | ca 1960 | Metepec, Mexico | ceramic, metal, aniline colors | Collection Valentin Jaquet; Domus, Kornfeld & Co., purchased in 1961 | IVb 2596
- 19 Tree of life, candle holder | ca. 1990 | Metepec, Mexico | ceramic, metal, paint | Marcelle Geiger-Vifian, gifted in 2008 | IVb 6182.02

In Izúcar de Matamoros, trees of life are still made today. They are used at wedding celebrations and religious ceremonies in honor of patron saints. The central figure in this candle holder is the archangel Gabriel: he is the messenger of God who announced the birth of Jesus. At weddings, the godparents present the bridal couples with such candle holders to wish them fertility and good harvests.

- 20 Tree of life, candle holder, Aurelio Flores (1901-1987) | before 1972 | Izúcar de Matamoros, Mexico | ceramic, metal, color | Collection Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 8717

Adam and Eve stand in the crown of this tree, decorated with roses and white doves. Between them, the snake winds around the trunk. Eve, who has already been seduced holds a fruit in her hand. Saint Michael stands on the snake’s back, his sword raised as the conqueror of evil.

After the fall from grace, he expels Adam and Eve from paradise. His feather headdress emphasizes his high rank as archangel and guardian of paradise. At the top of the tree sits God the Father. In one hand he is holding the globe of the world, the other is raised in blessing. He is crowned with three flowers symbolizing the Holy Trinity. They are accompanied by the sun and the moon, which play a central role in Mesoamerican cosmologies.

21 Tree of life | before 1979 | Metepec, Mexico | ceramic, metal, color | Collection Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 10772

Spring tree

The spring tree has a rich crown of green leaves, colorful petals and red fruits. White doves sit on its branches. It shows the magnificence, fertility, and abundance of trees. Candle holders in the shape of the spring tree are carried in processions dedicated to John the Baptist. They take place at the summer solstice in June and celebrate renewal.

22 Spring tree, candle holder | around 1970 | Mexico | ceramic, metal, paint | Theo Gantner, gifted in 1993 | VI 66452

23 Spring tree | ca 1990 | Metepec, Mexico | ceramic, metal, paint | Marcelle Geiger-Vifian, gifted in 2008 | IVb 6182.03

The mighty Ceiba, which often towers above other trees in the tropical rainforest, embodies the Mayan world tree. In pre-Hispanic times it was called yaxché, first or green tree, not only because of its green leaves, but also because green was the color of the center of the cosmos. The Ceiba is considered sacred since it constitutes the central axis of the world. It connects the middle world with the underworld and the celestial realms. Even today, the Maya treat it with respect: if a patch of forest is cleared, the Ceiba remains.

The world tree is a central motif on the festive blouses worn by women at weddings and celebrations in honor of the patron saints in Guatemala. It is represented as a flowering or fruit-bearing tree, suggesting fertility and renewal.

24 *huipil* Women's blouse with motif of the world tree, Kaqchikel-Maya | 1972 | San Juan Sacatepéquez, Guatemala | Cotton | Collection Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RHT 234

Paradise tree

On the world's first mountain, the creator planted the tree *Gaokerena*. Its large crown covers the entire paradise. It cures all ailments: to the body, it gives strength and health; to the soul, it gives enlightenment and eternal life.

The two peacocks represent the light and the sun in Persian tradition. Their magnificent ever-growing tail feathers remind the faithful of eternal life in paradise.

25 *Kalamkari* | 19th century | Isfahan, Iran | cotton, reserve print | collection Rudolf Staechelin-Finkbeiner, given by Denise Wagner, gifted in 2001 | Ile 3037

The tree has many meanings in Islam: as the tuba tree from paradise, its branches are covered with jewels and pearls and its crown is so large that it can be seen beyond paradise. As the tree of life, it symbolizes vitality and stands for the good and the worthwhile. And as the world tree, it represents the cosmic order.

Tree of life

A creation myth of the Ngaju in Borneo tells about the meeting of the god of the celestial realms, represented by the hornbill, and the goddess of the underworld, personified by the water snake. When the god of the celestial sphere lifted his headdress, the tree of life emerged, with golden leaves and ivory-coloured fruit growing on it. The holy battle between two hornbills gave rise to the world: to man and woman, sun and moon, holy lance and holy cloth, good and evil, luck and misfortune. The hornbills continued to fight and killed each other. A new tree of life grew from their remains.

The tree of life is important in rites of passage: for the harvest and New Year festivals, weddings and the celebrations for the deceased. On these occasions, a tree of life is established and the creation story is recited by priests to renew existence and the cosmic order.

- 27 Ceremonial mat with tree-of-life motif *batang garing* | 1951 | Dadahup, southern Borneo, Indonesia | rattan, diagonal weave, pigments | Christoph Barth, purchased 1953 | IIC 14423

World tree

In various regions of Indonesia, the world tree connects the underworld with the celestial realms. It represents the cosmos and life. The motif is often a combination of two different trees: the fig tree grows into the sky and symbolizes the creative breath or fire; the lotus emerges from the water and represents completeness.

In Javanese *wayang* puppet theatre, the world tree is one of the most important actors: it constitutes the beginning, end and pause sign *gunungan* or *kekayon*. Its oversized shadow embodies the cosmos, which is present as a microcosm in every human being.

- 28 Shadow puppet *gunungan* with world tree motif | early 20th century. | Yogyakarta, Central Java, Indonesia | parchment, water buffalo horn, paint, bamboo | Dorothea Hocks, purchased 2002 | IIC 21784

This shadow puppet shows the cosmic house, which represents the world. The court represents earthly life, beginning with birth and ending with death. In the middle is a gate that symbolizes the passage to another world – to the celestial spheres or to the underworld. It is flanked by the guardians of good and evil. On the roof above the gate, which is framed on both sides by two eagle heads, grows the world tree. Under it, on the right, stands the buffalo, symbol of good; on the left, the tiger, symbol of strength and evil.

They represent the good and evil forces and qualities that are at work in people and the cosmos. The top of the world tree is a lotus bud, embodying perfection.

- 29 Shadow puppet *gunungan* with world tree motif | before 1950 | Central Java, Indonesia | water buffalo skin, horn, paint | Ernst Schlager, gift from inheritance 1971 | IIC 16402

- 30 Relief plate with world tree motif | first half of the 20th century | Java, Indonesia | Wood, pigments | Werner Rothpletz, gift from inheritance 1981 | IIC 18958

Tree of long life

Gifts of money are given on various occasions in Japan. At engagements and weddings, births or anniversaries, they come in elaborate wrapping.

The evergreen pine, *matsu*, stands for long life and durability. Since pine needles grow in bundles and remain on the tree for up to 30 years, they stand for a happy marriage, numerous children and a family that sticks together.

Endless knots symbolize durability, endurance and loyalty.

- 31 *kotobuki yu'i no kazari*, wrapping for an engagement gift from the bride to her future husband | 1992 | Kansai, Japan | wood, paper, wire | Gerhard Baer, purchased 1994 | IId 11962.01-04
- 32 *shugibukuro*, decorated envelope for a cash gift | 1992 | Kanto, Japan | paper, wire, wood | Gerhard Baer, purchased 1994 | IId 11991.01-04

Between trees

The tapestry shows the Rütihard forest in MuttENZ, in the canton of Basel-Landschaft. Goblins and angels sit among the foliage, hunters roam the underwood and lovers seek a quiet spot among the trees.

This vibrant coexistence was threatened: from 2025, salt was to be extracted here industrially. Activists campaigned for the preservation of the landscape. They succeeded: the project was stopped and the Rütihard will remain a place of diversity, connection, recreation, and coming together in the future.

- 33 Tapestry "Rütihard" by Ernst Rudin, made by Suzanne Goubley-Gatien | 1967 | Basel, Switzerland and Aubusson, France | Wool | Department of construction and transportation of Basel-Stadt, gifted in 2021 | VI 72369

"The Life of the Mighty"

If trees could talk, what would they tell us?

Author Zora del Buono has embarked on a journey to visit the oldest and largest beings in Europe and North America. She has photographed the trees as personalities and collected stories from the amazing lives of these unusual, sometimes several thousand-year-old companions.

Here you can meet contemporary witnesses and listen to their stories.

- 34 Photographs and text excerpts from the book "Das Leben der Mächtigen" by Zora del Buono (2015), with kind permission of the publisher Matthes und Seitz, Berlin

Thank you for returning this handout.