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MEDIA RELEASE

James Cook and the Exploration of the Pacific

Between 1768 and 1780 the British navigator James Cook made three expeditions to the Pacific. His voyages changed Europeans’ understanding of the world, but also the world of the Pacific peoples. They vastly increased knowledge of navigation, astronomy, natural science and geography. From 7 October 2010 to 13 February 2011 the Historisches Museum Bern is presenting a major exhibition dedicated to the great navigator and to the Pacific. It not only traces the three voyages, but brings the Pacific region to life with the help of more than 400 objects, paintings and drawings from museums and private collections all over the world. Along with Cook, the focus is on John Webber, the painter on Cook’s third voyage. Some 200 years ago he donated his Pacific collection to Bern, his town of origin, in gratitude for the support he had received for his training as a painter.

The British seafarer James Cook (1728-1779) is regarded as one of the greatest explorers of all time. His three expeditions to the unknown expanses of the Pacific (between 1768 and 1780), changed European understanding of the world for ever. They greatly increased knowledge of navigation, astronomy, natural science and geography. The latest exhibition at the Historisches Museum Bern is dedicated to the great navigator and his discoveries. The temporary exhibition, entitled «James Cook and the Exploration of the Pacific» can be seen in Bern from 7 October 2010 to 13 February 2011. The exhibition brings together for the first time the most important items in Bern’s Webber collection with numerous major loans from Europe and overseas. On display are around 400 objects which Cook and his crews brought back to Europe from the Pacific more than 200 years ago, and which were subsequently scattered through museums and private collections all over the world. The exhibition follows Cook’s three voyages. In addition to the unique ethnographical items, magnificent works by the expedition painters and draughtsmen – Sydney Parkinson, William Hodges and John Webber – document events, people, landscapes, fauna and flora, superbly capturing the way the explorers reacted to the exotic scenes of the South Seas with a mixture of euphoria and scientific curiosity. Fascinating model ships, original charts and navigational instruments bring Cook’s voyages to life. The
The exhibition is enhanced with explanatory animations, which not only give a visual presentation of the progress of the three voyages, or of the beauty and use of individual items, but also explain, for example, how position was determined at sea, or how a sextant works.

“The exhibition gives anyone interested in history or ethnography an overview of Cook's three expeditions and of the Pacific region at that time. Globetrotters can plunge into the exotic world of the South Seas. For families we have put together a fun journey through the exhibition with a cabin-boy as guide and have produced audioguides for adults and children. A teaching pack has been prepared for schools. So culture enthusiasts, families, and travellers will find in the exhibition ‘James Cook and the Exploration of the Pacific’ information, entertainment and the chance to take a journey in the imagination,” says Dr Jakob Messerli, Director of the Historisches Museum Bern.

The discovery of a completely alien world
But how did Cook's expeditions, the leitmotif of the exhibition, come about? In 1768 James Cook sailed from Plymouth on the «Endeavour» on his first voyage (1768–71). His task was to carry out astronomical observations in Tahiti, which had been discovered the previous year, and subsequently to search for the legendary southern continent, the terra australis incognita. The discovery of the southern continent was also the goal of the second voyage (1772–75). On the third voyage (1776–80) Cook searched for a shorter sea route between the northern Pacific and the Atlantic, the north-west passage. In 1779 he met a violent death in Hawaii. As far as his instructions were concerned, Cook failed in all three voyages: the astronomical observations turned out to have been too inaccurate and he discovered neither a southern continent nor a north-west passage. And yet James Cook is regarded as one of the greatest navigators of all time. He explored the Pacific, sparking a craze for anything to do with the South Seas. James Cook became the epitome of the explorer, who had burst the boundaries of the known world. In the Pacific, Cook and his companions came upon an alien world. The Pacific cultural area had been settled from south-east Asia over the space of a few thousand years. The different Pacific cultures thus had common roots, but different, if comparable, social systems, myths and religious concepts. Gods, spirits and ancestors accompanied the Polynesians in their everyday lives. People, animals, plants and spiritual realities were bound magically together. To this was added the warm climate, fertile nature, and what to European eyes appeared to be the uninhibited women. The Europeans saw in the Pacific an earthly paradise, whose inhabitants were “noble savages”.

Explosion of knowledge of navigation, astronomy, natural science and geography
Cook's three expeditions were first and foremost research voyages to discover hitherto unknown seas and countries. Cook was an outstanding mapmaker, who measured and charted thousands of kilometres of coastline during his voyages. In keeping with the spirit of the Age of Enlightenment, natural scientists were taken on board, who discovered, documented and classified a multitude of unknown plants and animals.
John Webber: a Bernese who documented Cook’s third voyage

All three voyages were also accompanied by painters and draughtsmen. They recorded the unfamiliar landscapes and the people and their way of life, and documented the animals and plants. The expedition painter on the third voyage (1776–80) was John Webber, a painter with Bernese roots. John Webber was born in London in 1751, the son of the Bernese sculptor Abraham Wäber. At the age of six he came to Bern to live with his aunt Rosina Wäber. Her brother-in-law, the cabinet-maker Matthäus Funk, recognised the boy’s talent, and Johann Wäber was apprenticed to the landscape painter Johann Ludwig Aberli. With the support of Bern’s Society of Merchants, Webber then continued his training in Paris at the Académie Royale, before returning to London. In 1776, at the age of 24, John Webber was selected as painter for Cook’s third voyage. When he returned to London four years later, Webber had around 320 sketches and drawings in his luggage, which he later turned into oil paintings and engravings. The latter became best sellers and along with his watercolours and oil paintings helped to shape the European image of the South Seas. Probably John Webber’s most famous picture, the portrait of the Pacific princess Poedua now in the National Gallery of Australia, one of the most beautiful paintings from Cook’s voyages, is being shown exclusively in Bern.

«Pacific items» – valuable evidence of the Pacific cultures

In the islands of the Pacific the three expeditions led to numerous contacts, often for the first time, between Polynesians and European seafarers. These encounters were usually peaceful. As a rule the two sides exchanged goods, and in this way Cook and his companions obtained about 2000 objects which they brought back to Europe. Today these items are the last surviving evidence of the Pacific cultures which had until then remained untouched by the West. «Hardly any comparable objects survive in Polynesia, and for today’s Pacific cultures these collections are therefore an important component in strengthening awareness of their traditions and consequently their sense of identity», says Dr Thomas Psota, head of the Ethnography Department and curator of the exhibition. The painter John Webber brought around 120 items from the Pacific back to London. In 1790 he bequeathed these “Pacific items” to his home city of Bern, out of gratitude for the support he had received for his professional training. The Pacific works now form part of the core of the ethnographical collection of the Historisches Museum Bern.

An exhibition in cooperation with the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn and the Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna

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