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MEDIA RELEASE

Temporary exhibition “Homo migrans. Two Million Years on the Move”
7 November 2019 to 28 June 2020

How much migration is there in us?

The Bernisches Historisches Museum is holding the exhibition “Homo migrans. Two Million Years on the Move” from 7.11. 2019 to 28.6.2020. The journey starts with the first humans in Africa, shows the beginning of their dispersal all over the world two million years ago, and continues up to the present day in Switzerland. Neandertals in the Bernese Oberland, exiled Anabaptists, Italian guest workers and members of the “Fifth Switzerland”: alongside the large-scale migration movements that helped shape Switzerland, it also tells the stories and fates of individual migrants. And five documented DNA tests tackle the popular subject of personal ancestor research.

How much migration is there in me? This question accompanies visitors as they go round the exhibition, and invites them to consider the subject of migration both in a historical context and in relation to their own life stories and their origins. For migration has always been and still is the norm in the history of mankind. “The exhibition shows the historical background to an issue of current affairs around which the debate is often highly emotional,” says Jakob Messerli, the director of the Bernisches Historisches Museum, to explain the choice of the exhibition’s subject. “Even if we ourselves have not emigrated or immigrated, then – if we only look back far enough in our family history – our ancestors certainly did.”

Successful and unsuccessful attempts at immigrating or emigrating

“Homo migrans. Two million years on the move” covers a long stretch of time from the first humans in Africa four million years ago via the beginning of their dispersal all over the world two million years ago, right up to the present. The territory of today’s Switzerland is the focal point of the exhibition. Eleven subject areas with a total of more than 200 items as well as audio and video stations bring to life the diverse migration movements, their causes and effects. In the exhibition visitors are also invited to share their personal stories of migration.

Migration stories behind the objects

Even we Swiss were not always here. It was during the Ice Ages that the first humans reached Switzerland – illustrated in the exhibition by the famous Pratteln hand axe, which is thought to be the oldest evidence of human presence in Switzerland (300,000 to 120,000 BCE) yet found. Large-scale migration movements were also triggered by religious conflicts. One example among others that represents this in the exhibition is the so-called “Huguenot tapestry”. The table tapestry from the Bernese Council chamber illustrates the story of the Huguenots who fled to Switzerland in large numbers in the 16th and 17th centuries. Many of the Protestant refugees who fled from France were highly skilled specialists in various arts and crafts, and provided important stimuli to the economy and culture in Switzerland. Tapestry weavers from among their ranks were commissioned by the Bern City Council in 1686 to produce the “Huguenot tapestry”, which is one of the major items in the museum’s collection and is back on display in an exhibition for the first time in decades.

Objects that at first glance appear unassuming also contain eventful stories. The “hunger bread” from the famine years of 1816/1817 represents the economic crises and crises of poverty which were an important reason why about half a million Swiss emigrated in the 19th century.
Ancestor research with a DNA test kit
Migration is a global phenomenon which affects us all. About one third of the population of Switzerland today has a migration background, and more than one person in ten who holds a Swiss passport lives abroad, as part of the “Fifth Switzerland”. For people who would like to know more about their ancestors and thus about their own migration history, a market for DNA tests has emerged – although the scientific significance of the tests is disputed. In the run-up to the exhibition five test persons volunteered to have their genomes analysed and in the exhibition they reveal the results.

High resolution images: www.bhm.ch/images_homomigrans
Programme of accompanying events: www.bhm.ch/homomigrans

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