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Christening and much more

Special exhibition from 21 April 2012 – 7 October 2012

From 21 April 2012 until 7 October 2012, the Toy Worlds Museum Basle is devoting itself to a special exhibition on the theme of "Christening". On display will be over 450 unique items connected with typical christening customs from the last three centuries. They provide fascinating insights into the origin of the different christening customs and traditions. The exhibition will also include a competition in which three valuable Reborn dolls can be won.

Popular collectors' items, valuable information

The "Christening and much more" special exhibition presents hundreds of exhibits, among them numerous highly desirable collectors' items. Pride of place probably goes to the elaborate silver rattles with coral in countless shapes. A considerable proportion of the exhibition is devoted to christening gifts. The first evidence of the custom of godparent gifts comes from 13th-century Germany. The exhibition allows the development of this tradition to be traced over the centuries. Among the most popular gifts given by godparents to this day are money as well as mugs, cutlery and christening plates that accompany the godchild his or her whole life long.

The wealth of examples is remarkable. Particular mention must be made of the christening gowns and fine christening cushions in silk with Brussels lace as well as christening cards, the oldest of which in the exhibition dates back to 1819. Many original photographs provide an indication as to how a baby would be decked out for its christening in those days. "Christening and much more" takes visitors on a fascinating journey through time.

Origin, history and meaning of the christening ceremony

Christening, or baptism, ranks among the classic symbolic ecclesiastical ceremonies in all Christian denominations but takes different forms. This religious rite has its origin in the New Testament and signifies the beginning of life as a Christian. The practice extends much further back into pre-Christian times however. Similar rituals intended to bring about a spiritual cleansing of a believer, were known in Judaism.

The Greek word used in the New Testament is "baptizein", meaning to immerse. Flavius Josephus uses the term "baptism" in connection with his account of John the Baptist. The first baptism mentioned in the New Testament is that by John. This led to him becoming known by the sobriquet "the Baptist". John performed the baptism in the River Jordan. According to concurrent accounts by the evangelists, Jesus allowed himself to be baptised there by John. John also baptised some of the later disciples and apostles.

In the early church, baptism was a ritual that left a deep impression both on those being baptised and the fellow-worshippers. Baptism was a unique and radical step. The recipient's previous life was consigned to the past and a new one with Christ began. Baptism signified the rejection of former principles and values. It was often accompanied with changes to the external living conditions. Being baptised marked the start of a new self definition: I am now a Christian and orient my life totally in accordance with this fact. The persons to be baptised spent several years in preparation for this moment. During this time, they were initiated into the secrets of Christian life. The early church clearly knew how to motivate people for a life with and through Jesus Christ.

Baptism as a new start and an escape

Life at the end of the classical world was characterised by the call for "panem et circenses – bread and games". It was all about curiosity and sensation, about pleasure and merriment. The persons being baptised were escaping from this empty lifestyle. The break with their old identity was impressively expressed in the nocturnal baptism ceremony. The persons to be baptised were required to discard all clothing, jewellery and hairpins. They then stood naked in the baptismal font and were immersed three times in water. The rite is still celebrated in this manner in the Russian Orthodox Church to this day.

The persons being baptised renounced evil and the futility of a life far from God. They decided to renounce this world. They no longer wished to be defined in terms of success and achievement, of pleasure and debauchery, but through Christ.

They experienced baptism as like being reborn, became free people. When the persons being baptised stepped naked from the baptismal font and were then anointed with fragrant oils by the bishop – or the women by another woman - they truly felt themselves to be new people. At the same time, they found new brothers and sisters in the church, a community into which they were accepted totally without prejudice. They were, however, obliged to live a meaningful and fulfilled life. Incidentally: At the time of Emperor Constantine the Great (Roman Emperor from 306 -337 AD) it was normal for adults to delay baptism until close to the time of death, in order to be metaphorically washed clean when they came face to face with God. It is said that Emperor Constantine the Great himself was only baptised on his deathbed.

Christening, an innovation

For many years, adult baptism was the norm; it was only later that the christening of children became officially recognised. As to whether children were baptised with their parents in earlier times, en masse so to speak, is not known. The beginnings of christening lie lost in the mists of time.

Christening was already taking place in the third century AD however, and by the start of the fifth century it was common-place. The reasons for this were political: from 325 AD, Christianity was officially tolerated in the Roman Empire; in 380 AD, it was declared the state religion. In the fourth century, baptism had already become a ritual for all citizens of the Roman Empire. Sometimes coercive means were employed to baptise non-Christians.

Aurelius Augustine (354-430 AD), religious teacher and bishop from Hippo in North Africa, established the obligation of christening within the Roman church.

He took the view that every person was burdened by guilt at the time of birth; only christening could wash away this original sin. According to Augustine, it would be impossible to enter the Kingdom of Heaven unless christened. The idea took hold and burdened the belief of future generations of Christians. Augustine also developed the idea of a sacrament of baptism as a visible sign of an invisible act by God on people. This embosses a new character on the person being baptised as though with a stamp.

The large number of newly baptised after the 5th century called for changes to the church's organisation. Whereas baptism had originally been performed by the bishops, this role was now taken over by the priests. For hundreds of years, christening now became the norm. Infants had to be christened shortly after birth, unchristened children were almost unknown. The practice of christening was not called into question until the 16th century: whereas reformers such as Martin Luther, Johannes Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli spoke in favour of the retention of christening, other groups such as the Anabaptists returned to baptising believers: anyone who wants to be baptised must make a conscious decision to do so and that person is as a general rule an adult.

Open to new ideas

As christening increasingly became the norm, much of the original impact of baptism became lost. The child has no idea of this momentous event. For this reason, in the past a number of deeper meanings were attached to christening. For example that the child will be released from original sin, that a heathen child will become child of God or that it will become a member of the church through the christening.

The child is supposed to be cleansed with the christening water. According to the medieval church, the child would be washed clean of original sin. In our modern language, we could express it in this way: everything that burdens the child, beginning with hereditary factors up to the psychological family situation caused by the childhood experiences of the parents, grandparents and great grandparents, is washed away in the christening. The child is not defined by the past, but open to new ideas.

All religions have rites associated with the birth of a child. All peoples and cultures clearly have the need to express the mystery of birth and the divine gift of a child through rites. These rites frequently involve water and washing. A child should be washed clean of everything that shrouds its true nature. It should come into contact with the true source of life.

Whereas christening has been the norm in Europe since the 4th century, it is today no longer automatic. Many parents leave this step up to the children themselves. The increasing number of school-age and adult baptisms shows that baptism also makes sense at a later time in life. Although the number of baptised children may be in decline, christening remains an attractive celebration for many families: lively, convivial and positive. Because the idea of entrusting a small child to God, asking for his protection and to receive it into the church, remains familiar and fondly remembered by many people. The practice of adult baptism was only officially reintroduced in the Catholic Church in the 20th century with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

The sacrament of baptism

Baptism is a sacrament. Many people today are unable to relate to this term however. Sacrament means an "act of consecration with sworn obligation". "Sacramentum" was originally the oath of allegiance of a Roman soldier. In the sacrament of baptism, the person being baptised is committing himself to Christ. He is expressing the wish to shape his life together with Christ. But sacrament has yet another meaning. It is the translation of the Greek word "mysterion". Mysterion means the initiation of the believer in the mystery of life however.

Water as the elixir of life

The central element of baptism is undoubtedly the water. It was more impressive for the early Christians who stepped naked into the baptismal font than for us who pour a few drops over the head of a child. Water is the font of all life. Without water, life on Earth would be impossible. Almost three quarters of the Earth's surface is covered by oceans, lakes, rivers and ice. Below the Earth's surface, water flows as it also does mostly in the form of water vapour in the atmosphere above the Earth. We are familiar with water from the beginning through nine months in the amniotic fluid. And over two-thirds of our body consists of this elixir of life. Water is more than bread. We can live for several weeks without food, but less than ten days without water.

Water also has a cleansing and regenerating power in all religions and cultures. The baptismal water cleanses us from the faults of the past and renews us. Water is the symbol of baptism through which we receive a vital energy that even death is unable to destroy.

Incidentally, it is relatively simple to convey the meaning of the statement "water gives life" to kindergarten age children. We sow cress in two trays. One we water, the other we leave dry. After a few days, the effect is apparent: water gives life!

The white christening gown

The early Christians stepped naked into the baptismal font and then put on white garments. They put into practice the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians: "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ". Putting on the white garment is not merely something external, rather it transforms the whole person.

The meaning of the white garment is not primarily purity or innocence but rather "you have put on Christ". White may also be interpreted as the colour of the beginning, the sun and the resurrection on account of the fact that white is not really a colour, but an amalgam of all colours. A bride also wears white at her wedding as a reminder of this. And the white linen in which a deceased person is wrapped is also intended to convey the message: You belong to Christ.

In early Christianity, the white garment was taken off eight days after the Easter vigil. That is the reason why this day has retained its name "White Sunday" to the present time. In the early church, the baptismal candidates wore dark garments during the preparatory period of the catechumenate as a sign of the willingness to lead a new Christian life. They would then put on a white garment during the Easter vigil for the baptism. This early Christian custom is recalled in the present-day white christening gown worn by the newly baptised.

According to the christening liturgy, children should only be dressed in the christening gown after the actual christening. As a general rule, the parents have already dressed their child with the lovingly selected christening robe beforehand, for which reason the priest or deacon usually covers it with an additional christening robe as a clearly visible sign.

Christening candles, a lifelong companion

The custom of lighting and presenting a christening candle refers to Jesus Christ as the light of the world. By tradition, the christening candle is lit from the flame of the Easter candle which burns alongside the font during the year other than at Easter. The christening candle receives its light from the light of Christ – in the same way as the baptized person receives God's spirit from Christ. The Easter candle is always lit during the Easter vigil ceremony. The Easter mass celebrates Jesus' resurrection. This night is when the church holds the majority of its christenings. Jesus Christ is intended to become the light of life for the godchild.

As a general rule, the christening candle is a gift to the godchild from their godparents. It is intended to be a lifelong companion. For this reason, the christening candle is also traditionally lit at the other central events of a Christian life: the first communion, confirmation and wedding. Finally, it also burns at the final point in life, at the coffin during the burial, when the Christian passes into God's splendour.

Christening cards with a dual purpose

Christening cards are hand-written or pre-printed, sometimes beautifully decorated and painted cards. They were handed over by the godparents for the godchild on the day of the christening and had a dual function. They were bearers both of good and pious wishes for the new-born's journey through life as well as a monetary gift of some kind. The charming notes may justly be described as a piece of graphic folk art. It has been customary for godparents to present gifts since the 13th century. Monetary gifts originated in the 15th century. At first they were packed in small silk bags, later also in ducat boxes. The most important and most common enclosure was the christening card however. The oldest currently known christening card of this type comes from Zabern in Alsace. It was written in 1593.

At the end of the 18th century and especially in the 19th century, printed christening cards were predominantly used. These christening cards were common throughout Germany, Alsace and German-speaking Switzerland. Emigrants have taken the custom as far as the USA.

The presentation of the godparent gift was always accompanied by good wishes and pious exhortations for the child's future progress through life. The same sayings and verses were often used for this purpose over hundreds of years. Texts from the catechism and the bible were popular as well as good advice or personally formulated maxims for the godchild. These were generally in verse form. Many of the christening notes were decorated with colourful flower, plant and animal motifs, thereby becoming personalised works of art and mementos. Apart from a few exceptions, the artists remain unknown.

Christening coins made the event more memorable

A christening coin is a medallion-like minting weighing the same as an old thaler coin, referring to the Christian baptism in words and pictures. It was given to the godchild by its godparents at the time of the christening. A considerable number of christening coins were struck at the Zellerfeld mint in the Harz mountains from the 17th century to around 1767. The forerunner of the Harz christening coins is probably the christening coins known to have been produced at the mint in Gotha (Saxony) in the years 1670 and 1671.

The embossings on the christening coins show various depictions of baptism such as Christ's baptism in the River Jordan or baptism ceremonies in the church, augmented with Christian texts and baptism maxims.

Christening mugs as a lifelong keepsake

The christening mug is a drinking vessel given to the godchild as a gift.

Nowadays, these are generally silver-plated or silver mugs. They may be plain or embellished with tasteful decorations. It is common practice to engrave mottos, baptismal names or the initials of the godchild. If the date of birth is engraved, it is generally done on the underside. The christening mug is a popular godparent gift, intended to accompany the godchild throughout their life. The vessel symbolises purity and innocence. It is a reference to the cleansing and life-giving importance of water and in this connection, an allusion to water in the religious act of baptism.

Godparents as earthly guardian angels

The godparents are expected, as they promise in the christening, to help the godchild become a good Christian. Being a godparent is not only an honorary position, but also a service in the life of the child. It also protects the parents from false isolation. However, it might prove difficult to exert influence on the upbringing of the child in practice, for whom they accept full responsibility in case of an emergency. The godparents should not simply be "gift dispensers" turning up politely with a present on birthdays and perhaps at Christmas, but ideally a friend and companion in all areas of the godchild's life – a kind of earthly guardian angel.

Reborn dolls – a new trend

The exhibition features 25 Reborn dolls dressed in beautiful old christening gowns. This demonstrates more clearly just how elaborate and voluminous these were. Reborn dolls is the name used for dolls made from vinyl intended to look as much like a real baby as possible. The name derives from the fact that the process of making them is described as a "rebirth".

These dolls first appeared in the USA at the beginning of the 1990s. Doll collectors responded enthusiastically to this new type of doll and they spread rapidly around the world, thanks to the Internet. Doll collectors acquire a Reborn doll for the most diverse reasons. It might be a love of dolls, or enthusiasm for a work of art. Of course, there are also collectors who view these dolls as a type of child substitute. The prices of the Reborn dolls vary considerably depending on quality. They can range from several hundred to several thousand Swiss francs.

Exhibition, memory game and competition

Visitors to the exhibition can train their memory with a special baby pairs game on an iPad. If you are successful, you will see the incomparable Evian baby commercial. This unique pairs game has been made possible thanks to a cooperation with Evian Volvic Switzerland AG. To accompany the special exhibition, there will also be a competition: 25 Reborn babies from the exhibition are to be christened. Anyone entering the competition via the Internet or directly in the museum can win one of three valuable Reborn Babies.

Facts & figures

Opening hours.

Museum, shop and restaurant,
from 10.00–18.00 daily

The Swiss and Upper Rhine Museum Passes are valid for the Toy Worlds Museum Basle.

Admission.

CHF 7.00 / 5.00

Children up to 16 years of age are admitted free of charge and only in the company of adults.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.

The entire building is wheelchair-accessible.

Media contact.

Further information is available from:

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