



On the Backs of Camels

27 February 2024 to 26 January 2025

Weltmuseum Wien & Theseus Temple

The special exhibition *On the Backs of Camels* at the Weltmuseum Wien looks at past, present, and future encounters with camels and their close relatives (collectively known as camelids). Historical and contemporary works of art, films and photographs, and important objects from the museum's collections, some of which have never been shown before, along with international loans illustrate the close relationship between camelids and the people who live with and depend on them.

Camels and their relatives have shaped human cultures. These fascinating animals are a source of livelihood and part of the cultural identity for people around the world. From the Andes to the deserts of Africa, Arabia, and Asia, living with camelids has shaped human life and the natural world in unexpected ways. This shared history also has a darker side: militarism, colonialism, exploitation, and the suffering of humans as well as animals.

In this exhibition, the Weltmuseum Wien explores the many facets of living with dromedaries, Bactrian camels, llamas, and alpacas. It examines the influence that these animals, all of which are



camelids, have on the societies of which they are a part. It also sheds light on the important roles they could play in the future.

The exhibition's thematic arc extends from the first camels – which evolved in North America – through their spread across the world and later domestication. The museum focuses on how they often are seen today as universal livestock that can provide milk, wool, meat, fertiliser, and fuel and also serve as pack animals, mounts, and draught animals. In all these roles, camelids have contributed to human survival and culture. Camelids are central to festivals such as *Tinka de Alpaka* in the Andes and the *Bikaner Festival* in India. They are the subjects of traditional and contemporary knowledge. Camel songs in Mongolia and on the Arabian Peninsula belong to UNESCO World Cultural Heritage.

The achievements and expansion of major empires, such as the Inca Empire, Rome, the Ottoman Empire and China were also linked to the capabilities of camels and their relatives. Later, colonialism changed the relationship between humans and camelids. In South America, llamas and alpacas were replaced by cows and horses. The undomesticated guanacos were hunted by the conquistadores. Dromedaries were employed by European colonialists to conquer and control new territories, such as Australia and Namibia. One of the exhibition's featured sculptures commemorates Napoleon, possibly the first European general of the Modern era to have ridden a camel during the Egyptian campaign of 1799. The orientalist paintings by Carl Heinrich Müller explore romantic notions that are entwined with this colonial heritage.

The opportunities afforded by the extensive use of products derived from camelids build a bridge to the present and point to the future: to address climate change, camelids have emerged as potential bearers of hope in medicine, nutrition, and the textile industry.

The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2024 to be the International Year of the Camelid. The UN has drawn significant attention to the use of alpacas, llamas, Bactrian camels, and dromedaries to alleviate extreme poverty and hunger, to safeguard the world's ecosystems, and to raise the income of women. The Weltmuseum Wien presents the exhibition *On the Backs of Camels* as part of Austria's international commitment to the UN's initiative.

In its continuing commitment to reach young visitors, the museum will integrate special labels in the exhibition for children and families and has designed interactive stations that invite visitors to take part in intergenerational activities. The whole family can learn new, fun facts about camels and their relatives. Visitors can touch, feel, and smell the wools that different camelids produce, and hear the different noises that camels and their relatives make. We invite visitors of all ages to visit the exhibition and take part in the museum's different program offerings about camels and their relatives.



Themes and galleries of the exhibition

Old companions

"How did camels become domesticated?" is the question that the exhibition addresses after a short prologue. With the help of a sculpture by American artist Nancy Graves and historic ceramics, the thematic arc spans from the evolution of prehistoric camels to their later domestication. Originating in North America, early ancestors of camels once populated much of the world. While the ancestors of camels died out in North America, their relatives in South America, Asia, and Africa adapted to their new environmental conditions. With the exception of some wild species, camels were domesticated around five thousand years ago. Their strength, their relatively limited needs, and their ability to adapt to extreme habitats played a central role in their adoption into human societies.

Universal livestock?

The second gallery is dedicated to the diverse uses of camelids. Here, films by Walter Dostal and Ibrahim Shaddad are juxtaposed with objects from the collections of the Weltmuseum Wien that tell us something about how these animals were kept. Camelids not only provide products such as milk, wool, meat, fertiliser, and fuel, but also ensure the survival of many people to this day as riding, pack, and draught animals. They are therefore regarded as almost universal livestock, although different cultures use them in very different ways.

Camel cultures

The close bonds between owners and their camelids are still celebrated today with festivals, races, competitions, and rituals. *Tinka de Alpaka*, which takes place every year in the Andes, and the *Bikaner Festival* in Rajasthan, India, refer to centuries-old traditions. Camel races are also very popular, not only in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region but also in India and Australia. Recently, robots have replaced child jockeys in many of these races.

Camel kingdoms

The Incas, the Romans, and the Ottomans built their empires with the help of these resilient, powerful animals. The skeleton of a camel was discovered during an archaeological excavation in Tulln in 2006. It probably dates from the Second Siege of Vienna and can be seen in the exhibition.



When China expanded its borders westwards during the reign of Emperor Qianlong, camels played a central role, as impressively documented by a series of large-format copperplate engravings from the eighteenth century.

Camels and colonialism

European colonialism changed the role and importance of camelids in a decisive way. In the sixteenth century, Spanish conquistadors brought cows and sheep to South America, which displaced native llamas and alpacas. In order to gain grazing land for their herds, the Spanish ruthlessly hunted wild guanacos. The guanaco population dwindled from around 50 million when the Europeans arrived to just 600,000. Napoleon encountered dromedaries during his Egyptian campaign, and European colonial powers deliberately introduced camelids in Australia and Namibia in the nineteenth century that were not originally native there.

Westerners' and Easterners' dream destinations

In nineteenth-century Europe, camels embodied a romanticized idea of the Orient. In the exhibition, this is illustrated with paintings by the orientalist Carl Heinrich Müller. Wooden prints and drawings from Japan and China show that a similar sentimentalization of the camel as exotic also took place in East Asia. Even today, in the age of mass tourism, a camel ride is a must for anyone travelling to Egypt.

Livestock of the future

The exhibition also critically examines the opportunities for using the products obtained from camels. Since the twentieth century, the increasing influence of humans on their environment and industrialisation have changed our relationship with camelids. These animals increasingly are being replaced by machines. Land grabbing and the displacement of nomads, the drying up of pastureland and water sources, as well as rapidly falling market prices for wool pose existential challenges to herders and other people who depend on camels for their livelihood. *Alpaqueiras*, a photo series by photographer Alessandro Cinque, who lives in Peru and the USA, documents the attempt to breed more economically viable camelids by crossing alpacas with wild vicuñas. However, his pictures also address the plight of alpaca farmers, who are increasingly forced to give up their traditional way of life.

There is a growing awareness that environmental protection and the changes to our planet's climate require more sustainable production of milk, meat, and wool. This is hardly possible with sheep and cows – but it is with camelids. Photographs by Jean Francois Lagrot were taken on



camel farms in Maubeuge, France, where camels are replacing cows. Camelids are also of interest to biotechnology. Their unique immune systems promise solutions in immunotherapy against cancer, among other things.

Climate change, medicine, nutrition, the textile industry: camels and their relatives have become the beacons of hope for the future. The exhibition *On the Back of Camels* brings us closer to them in a multifaceted way.



Artists

Mohamed Arejda, Morocco
Nicola Brandt, Namibia/Germany
Dhaggan Collective, UK/Somalia
Josh Gluckstein, UK
Nancy Graves, USA
Johnny Young, Australia
Mercedes Lambrolle, Peru/Switzerland
Taus Machacheva, born in Dagestan, lives in Dubai
Erbossyn Meldibekov, Kazakhstan
Leopold Carl Müller, Germany/Austria
Ibrahim Shaddad, born in Sudan, lives in Egypt
Meigumi Takeichi, Japan

Curatorial team

Gerard van Bussel, curator Collection North and Central America
Irina Eder, cultural educator
Tobias Mörike, curator Collection North Africa, West and Central Asia, Siberia
Bettina Zorn, curator Collection East Asia: China, Korea, Japan

Catalogue

On the Backs of Camels

Edited by Tobias Mörike and Bettina Zorn
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136 pages
Price: € 25
Available in the museum shop and online shop



Exhibition design

Each gallery in the exhibition *On the Backs of Camels* combines different narratives, media, and curatorial styles. The show thus offers different approaches viewing individual themes. The leitmotif of the exhibition design is a sandstorm that runs through all the rooms. Architect Viola Stifter (*Refosco S.p.A.*) refers to the arid regions of the world and the resilience of camelids, which can adapt to many extreme living conditions.

Exhibition in the Theseus Temple

This year's exhibition in the Theseus Temple, which opens on 18 April, complements *On the Back of Camels* at the Weltmuseum Wien. At this public location in the Volksgarten in Vienna, Dubai-based artist Zeinab Alhashemi illuminates with her work the importance of camels to culture and life on the Arabian Peninsula.

Zeinab Alhashemi

An installation in the context of *On the Backs of Camels*

Theseus Temple, Volksgarten Vienna

18 April until 13 October 2024



Lecture

Tue, 16 Apr, 7 pm

The Curious Case of the Camel in Modern Japan: (De)Colonialism, Orientalism, and Imagining Asia?

Lecture by Ayelet Zohar (English)

Ayelet Zohar critically analyses camel images as a metonymy for Asia as well as Japanese attitudes towards the continent.

The lecture reads into encounters with the exotic animals, from Nanban art, realist Dutch-influenced illustrations, through Misemono roadshows of the first camel-pair imported in 1821. Modernity and Japan's wars of Pan-Asiatic fantasies associated camels with Asia's poverty, bringing camels into zoos, tourist venues, and military zones, as lowly beasts of burden, while post-war images project the image of exotica and foreignness on camels as Buddhist 'peace' messengers. Zohar convincingly argues that in the Japanese imagination, camels serve as signifiers of Asia as Otherness, the opposite of Japan's desire for self-association with Western cultures.

Ayelet Zohar is a Senior Lecturer at the History of Art Department, Tel Aviv University. She received her PhD from the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London (UCL), University of London (2007), followed by a Postdoctoral Fellowship at Stanford University (2007–2009), and a second Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC (2011). Her main fields of research are the history and theory of Japanese photography; Contemporary fine art photography; Historical, Meiji era photography; Art and visual culture in Japan; Postcolonial theory; Deleuzian studies; Psychoanalysis and Trauma Studies. She has published extensively on issues of Japanese photography and contemporary art, war memory in Japanese photography, gender and sexuality in contemporary Japanese art/photography.

Duration: 90 minutes

Participation: all guests need a valid museum ticket

Registration: online (limited number of participants)

Meeting point: WMW Forum

PRESS PHOTOS

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<https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/press/>

Taus Machacheva

Super Taus and a Camel Yasha

2017

Photo: Imam Guseinov

Special thanks to Dzhamilya Dagirowa, Naida Omarova; commissioned by R&D Magazine



Ibrahim Shaddad

Jamal (A Camel)

Film still

1981

© Ibrahim Shaddad, Arsenal – Institut für Film und Videokunst e.V.



Alessandro Cinque

Alina – Alpaqueros

2021

© Alessandro Cinque



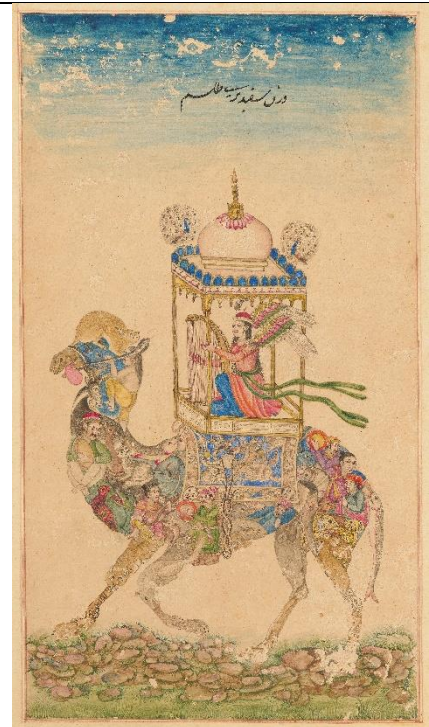
Alessandro Cinque
Veterinary – Alpaqueros
2021
© Alessandro Cinque



Jean-François Lagrot
Camel Farm Maubeuge
© Jean-François Lagrot



Camel miniature painting
India
Weltmuseum Wien
© KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien





welt
museum
wien

Llama figurine

Bread dough

Weltmuseum Wien

© KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien



Alpaca figurine

Peru

Weltmuseum Wien

© KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien



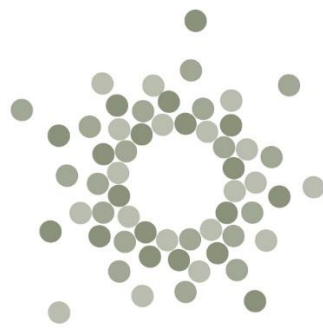
Calebash

Peru

Weltmuseum Wien

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welt
museum
wien

Camel blanket

Turkmenistan

Weltmuseum Wien

© KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien



Tea set

Japan

© KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien





Opening times, tickets, entrance fees

www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/information/

Additional information regarding your visit

Guided tours, bookings and reservations for events

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Information, questions and suggestions

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Exhibition programmes and events

All events can be found online in the [event calendar](#) of the Weltmuseum Wien.

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We request that, in addition to mentioning your medium, you also specify the date of your visit and attach a scan of your valid press pass. Many thanks for your understanding!

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