

Botanical Garden Zurich

Kai Kersten, Decolonize Zurich

The first Botanical Garden of the University of Zurich was founded in 1836 in the Schanzengraben by Heinrich Zollinger (1818-1859). He traveled to Java (Indonesia) in the mid-19th century as a plant collector for Alphonse de Candolle (1806-1893), another important Swiss botanist. In the 1840s, Zollinger collected thousands of plants in the Dutch colonies in Asia and later established a coconut plantation with his family in East Java in the 1850s. By using plants imported from Java for the establishment of the Botanical Garden and heavily relying on the colonial structures built by the Dutch empire at the time Zollinger was complicit in colonialism.

In the gardens, botanical knowledge coming from the European empires was displayed and organized in a particular way, presenting this knowledge as inherently new even though they relied heavily on indigenous guidance, thus, erasing indigenous contributions. The botanical garden therefore contains images of colonial surveying of the world and nature. They illustrate that in the European imperial understanding, there is a clear division between society and nature. This dualistic worldview also shaped the colonies, in which nature was deliberately altered, for example, to increase the profit of plants on plantations.

While botanical gardens in Europe reflect the impressive diversity of plant species around the world, colonization made these plants rare in the first place through plantation management and other plant eradication. Today, these rare plants are a biological treasure in European metropolises as a remnant of colonization, and where they once were, they are often extinct.

Sources

Baber, Zaheer: The Plants of Empire: Botanic Gardens, Colonial Power and Botanical Knowledge, in: Journal of Contemporary Asia (2016), p. 659-679.

Haila, Yrjö: Beyond the Nature-Culture Dualism, in: Biology and Philosophy 15 (2000), p. 155-175.



Botanical Garden Zurich

Kai Kersten, Decolonize Zurich

On average residents of 15th century Zurich used to change their place of residence every five years. In this context of frequent relocation, the house name was often the only stable element, serving as a tool for orientation, identification and clarification of ownership. For example, a record of a sale from 1443 recounts the change of ownership of the "Hus zum M****kopff, which we today associate with the house situated at Neumarkt 13. Another source proves that in 1467 the "sidensticker" [silk ticker] Jörg Rott and his family lived in this house and paid five pounds in taxes. This goes to show that the first mention of the house name "Hus zum M****kopff" dates back to the 15th century.

Several houses in Zürich in the 14th and 15th century bear the term "M****" in their names. For example the house at Marktgasse 19 was known from the 16th century as "M****könig". Such house names are not unique to Zürich but can be found in numerous late medieval towns. But what did the contemporaries of that time understand by this, from today's point of view, racist term? In the early Middle Ages from the 6th to the 11th century, the term "M****" was a designation of origin and can be traced back to the Latin loanword "maurus" (referring to someone of Mauritanian origin). Increasingly, however, it merged with the Greek term "moros", which means foolish and godless. This conflation of words also reflects the view of "Christian Europe" on the "Muslim world." The controversial term consequently referred to inhabitants of Mauritania, to the whole of Africa, as well as to Muslims.

Until the Crusades in the 11th century, there was relative little direct contact in Europe with people who were referred to as M*** at the time. Nevertheless, numerous figures with explicitly black skin color appeared in theological texts and images. These figures embodied the negative, the sinful and evil for contemporaries. Until the late Middle Ages, horror images of grotesque black demons and devils with African features were spread.

