

Exhibition at Basel Historical Museum, 11.11.2016-18.06.2017

Active Agents – Chemical and Pharmaceutical Innovations

Whether pain relievers or dyes, insecticides or plastic – the variety of innovations delivered by the chemical and pharmaceutical industries permeates every aspect of our everyday life. But how do such innovations come about? And what kind of social challenges do they bring with them? From 11.11.2016 to 18.6.2017, the “Active Agents” exhibition at the Basel Historical Museum will be looking at these questions. It sheds light on differing aspects with reference to concrete examples of influential inventions that range from penicillin through Araldite to DDT.

Today it is difficult to imagine a world without antibiotics, plastics, cosmetics and agrochemicals. Since the emergence of the modern chemical and pharmaceutical industries 150 years ago, their manifold products have influenced our lives profoundly. Hardly any other industries are as completely reliant on the interplay between research and development. The magic word is “innovation” as without new products in the pipeline, companies may simply disappear. But how do innovations take place? How much of a factor is played by chance in their development? Does patenting actually encourage innovation? What is the interaction between research, production and consumers? And how are possible risks and secondary effects dealt with? The “Active Agents” exhibition looks at these and other questions and highlights widely differing aspects referring to 17 concrete examples from the last 150 years. These stories extend from world-famous names like Aspirin, Bakelite and DDT to less famous but certainly no less influential products like Salvarsan, Largactil or magnetic tape. In this way, fundamental reflections on the subject of innovation will be interwoven with the history of the chemical and pharmaceutical industries.

An international perspective with a focus on Basel

The exhibition is a collaborative project together with the DASA Arbeitswelt exhibition (Working World exhibition), so the focus is not just on Basel but also on the chemical and pharmaceutical industries as a whole. In addition to items from the Basel Historical Museum’s collection are objects on loan from various industrial history museums and company archives. Among the highlights are a medallion containing a penicillin mould specimen from the Alexander Fleming Laboratory Museum in London, a tape recorder from the Deutsches Technikmuseum in Berlin and a sanatorium recliner from the Rätisches Museum in Chur. The last example makes it clear that the emphasis of the exhibition is not on the history of science or industry, but on innovation stories that are set within a social context and illustrated with exhibits as well as a great deal of photographic material.

In order to do justice to Basel as a centre for the life-sciences industry, a special section has been created in the entrance area. Against a background that sketches out Basel’s industrial history, interviews with employees from Basel companies are shown on a number of monitors. In doing this, the Basel Historical Museum gives a voice to the people who came to or remained in Basel because of this industry and shows that it is not just the commercial or architectural aspects of the industry that shape our city

Scenography and multimedia

The spatial designers from ZMIK in Basel collaborated with the graphic designers from Berrel Gschwind, also based in Basel, to create a design in which the various subject areas are located spatially and experienced with all the senses. Interactive stations along with a multimedia guide (Actionbound app) offer visitors the opportunity to enjoy a lighter approach to the ethical and normative questions that automatically arise when dealing with innovations from the chemical, pharmaceutical and life-sciences industries.

The exhibition is supported by:

Stiftung für das Historische Museum Basel

Freiwillige Akademische Gesellschaft

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Exhibition venue: HMB – Basel Historical Museum, Barfüsserplatz, CH-4051 Basel

Exhibition dates: 11 November 2016 to 18 June 2017

Opening times: Tuesday to Sunday 10:00-17:00

Closed: 24.12., 25.12., 26.12., 31.12.2016, 1.1., 6.-8.3. (Fasnacht), 14.4. (Good Friday)

Open: 1.5. (Tag der Arbeit)

Tickets: CHF 15.-/10.-/5.-

Press pack: www.hmb.ch/presse.html

Photos can also be sent by email on request.

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