

Press release

THE WAY OF THE MASTERS – The Great Artists of India, 1100–1900

1 May to 21 August 2011

800 years of Indian painting, some 240 masterpieces by more than 40 artists – and all this at a glance. For the first time an exhibition offers a comprehensive overview of the entire history of Indian painting. What makes it even more exciting is that the focus throughout is on individual painters.

In the popular exhibition about the “Pahari Masters” in 1992 which was dedicated to the greatest painters of the eponymous north Indian region, Museum Rietberg opened a new path: India’s artists were lifted out of their apparent anonymity and presented through their work as individuals

In 2011 – some twenty years later – the Museum Rietberg decided it was high time to celebrate the work of Indian painters from every region of the sub-continent over the last eight centuries. Until now, major exhibitions of Indian painting have usually focused on certain places, periods or themes. This approach shows that more weight tends to be given to the context of the production of Indian paintings – such as the patrons who commissioned them, and the iconographic, religious, and local traditions to which they belong – than to the individual painters.

This exhibition is the result of decades of painstaking research. To identify individual artists, microscopically small signatures were deciphered, pilgrim registers were searched for artists’ names and genealogies, and systematic stylistic comparisons were made. Once more, Museum Rietberg is doing pioneering work and is also accompanying the exhibition with a major publication which should provide new bases for further research.

Scarcity of source material has made this a particularly challenging undertaking – Indian art history lacks any equivalent of Vasari’s biographies of European renaissance artists. The memoirs of the emperors Akbar (reg. 1556–1605) and Jahangir (reg. 1605–1627), in which artists were described and their qualities discussed, are a great exception – normally all that can be found are scattered and partial fragments of information about artists and artists’ families. Nonetheless, the artistic paths and development of certain individual masters can be reconstructed from this.

These paths are the focus of the exhibition. Changing patrons, and other external events, shaped the stylistic development of each artist's work, and this can be seen here. The career of every artist is documented with between three and ten representative works. Importantly, too, the way the exhibition has been planned highlights comparisons between artists from the same family over generations, or between artists who were working at the same time.

If, for example, one looks at the careers of the two brothers *Manaku* and *Nainsukh* who were both trained in their father's workshop in Guler, interesting differences emerge. Whereas *Manaku* stayed closer to the traditional painting style of his father, *Nainsukh* settled at another court and developed his own unique pictorial language there, one which excels especially in the use of newer naturalistic elements.

Searching for innovative forms of expression, the painters kept developing their skills throughout their careers, in a critical engagement with their artistic training and with foreign influences. The creative paths followed by individual masters are fascinating – and in some cases the geographical paths followed are also impressive.

Farrukh Beg, for example, was trained in Khorasan in central Asia and subsequently worked in Kabul, Lahore, Bijapur and Agra. The famous emigrant thus covered distances of several thousand kilometres. One of the reasons for this was his search for a patron who would support his artistic visions.

But a quest for self-realisation like *Farrukh Beg's* was an exception in large workshops; at the court of Emperor Akbar, for example, the stylistic coherence of an illustrated manuscript was rated higher than the qualities of the individual artists. The work by *Bagta* and his son *Chokha* shows this clearly and reveals enormous stylistic changes. After being trained in a large workshop, they went to a small court and their style changed almost overnight as if creative energy had suddenly been given free rein – it seems that at smaller courts artistic freedom was less restricted by superimposed rules.

More than forty artists stand at the centre of the exhibition, and their works convey a broad and comprehensive idea of Indian painting to the visitors. The earliest exhibits are illustrated manuscripts from the twelfth century; the latest works from the early twentieth century are large-format paintings from Udaipur which in their choice of composition and perspective reveal the growing influence of photography.

The exhibition is testimony to a lively exchange between artists; pictorial ideas and compositions were swapped, refined, and further developed – right across the sub-continent from the courts of the Himalayan foothills to the workshops in the southern Deccan region.

Probably the biggest impulse came from painters who had been trained in Persia and were invited to India by the Mughal emperors. Different aesthetic concepts (such as that represented in the painting of the Safavid dynasty, 1501–1722) were pursued and enlivened in an environment which was very fruitful for the arts. European pictures, especially allegorical or Christian engravings, were also circulating among the artists and met with varied responses. Western techniques for representing perspective, in particular, fascinated and inspired numerous artists.

The structure of the exhibition gives each artist the space he deserves and at the same time follows the different branches of development in Indian painting. Thus visitors can follow individual artists through a line of tradition and at the same time can acquire an overview of the history of painting in the sub-continent.

Through its love for pictorial art, India has come to possess an incomparable treasury of artworks – radiating with visual and material splendour. With their incredible dedication to detail and to the intricate execution of even the most seemingly minor motifs, they transport the viewer into another world.

As exotic as names such as *'Abd al-Samad, Kripal and Sahibdin* may sound, these artists all share a great technical refinement, compositional inventiveness and sense of colour. It is not surprising that Rembrandt possessed a collection of Indian miniatures. The great Indian masters are unquestionably the equals of Dürer, Michelangelo or Vermeer.

PARTNERSHIPS

The exhibition which was conceived by the Museum Rietberg will also be shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from 26 September 2011 to 8 January 2012.

SPONSORS

The exhibition is supported by Novartis and the G+B Schwyzer-Stiftung.

LENDING INSTITUTIONS

Among the forty lending institutions are the leading museums of Europe and the United States: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Ashmolean Museum, Bodleian Library, Cleveland Museum of Art, College Museum of Art Williamstown, David Collection Copenhagen, Harvard Art Museums, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Musée Guimet, Museum für angewandte Kunst MAK, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Museum of Islamic Art Doha, Philadelphia Museum of Art, San Diego Museum of Art, Staatliches Völkerkundemuseum München, Staatsbibliothek Berlin.

Apart from this, Museum Rietberg also presents numerous works which are rarely shown abroad. From the Golestan Palace in Tehran paintings can be seen from the legendary *Jahangir* album; the Institute of Oriental Studies in St Petersburg has loaned the eight best paintings from their album, and the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle is represented with works from the *Padshanama*.

Indian institutions which have given loans include the National Museum in Delhi, the Palace Museum in Udaipur, the Mumbai Museum, and the Bharat Kala Bhavan in Varanasi. Numerous works from private collections complete the exhibition.

PUBLICATIONS

Die Meister der indischen Malerei

Jorrit Britschgi (in German)

Approx. 104 pages and 70 colour plates, 30.5 x 23.5 cm, paperback with flaps.

Subscription price until 21 August 2011: CHF 29, EUR (D) 21; thereafter approx. CHF 39, EUR (D) 28.

ISBN 978-3-907077-51-1

Masters of Indian Painting

Milo Beach, BN Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer (eds.) (in English)

Artibus Asiae, supplement 48.1/2

2 vols., 600 pages, more than 600 colour plates, 30.5 x 23.5 cm, comprehensive bibliography, bound

Subscription price until 21. August 2011: CHF 180, EUR (D) 130

ISBN 978-3-907077-50-4

FILM IN THE EXHIBITION

Nainsukh – Works of an Indian Painter

Dogri and Kangri, with English subtitles, 34 minutes

Nainsukh was the greatest Indian painter of the eighteenth century and he is the first Indian painter whose biography has been made into a film. Fascinated by the naturalistic painting style of the Mughal court, he increasingly turned away from the traditional style of his family, his well-known father Pandit Seu and his brother Manaku. In 1740, at the age of thirty, he was invited to the palace of Jasrota where he painted for Raja Balwant Singh. From then on Nainsukh documented the life of the prince: intimate everyday moments as much as festive evenings of music, dance and theatre.

The young Indian director Amit Dutta, in collaboration with the painting specialist Eberhard Fischer has created authentic, powerful visual worlds.

“Nainsukh” was shown at the Venice Film Festival – in the section “Orizzonti” covering new tendencies in international cinema – in 2010.

The film can be seen at all times at the exhibition in a shortened version; the full version is shown twice in the film podium. For information see the events programme.

PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

12 April 2011 – 1 April 2012

Tradition and Innovation: Three Painter Generations in North India

In the Park-Villa Rieter more treasures by the famous family of painters around *Pandit Seu* from the north Indian Pahari region can be seen.

1 May 2011, 15.00

Masters on Masters

Short talks by three distinguished specialists in Indian art history,
Milo C. Beach, B.N. Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer (in English)
Park-Villa Rieter

8 and 15 May 2011, 12.00

Nainsukh – A Film by Amit Dutta

Matinée at Filmpodium Zürich
Information and Reservations: www.filmpodium.ch

19 and 26 May 2011, 19.30–21.00

Wonders of their Time: The World of Indian Painters

Course by Jorrit Britschgi (in German)
Volkhochschule des Kantons Zürich
Information and Reservations: www.vhszh.ch

22 May 2011, 11.00

The World of Indian Painters

Talk by Jorrit Britschgi, curator of the exhibition (in German)
Park-Villa Rieter

9 July 2011, 20.00

The Zurich Chamber Orchestra at the Museum Rietberg

Detailed information is published in separate flyers, in the newsletter and on the website at
www.rietberg.ch

GUIDED TOURS AND WORKSHOPS ON THE EXHIBITION

Opportunities for adults:

- **Public guided tours:** Sundays, 11.00, Wednesdays 18.00, Thursdays 12.15
- **Private guided tours:** Tel. + 41 (0)44 206 31 11/31

Workshops for Adults, Kids and Family

- **Children's and Family Workshop**
- **Workshops for Grandparents and Grandchildren**
- **Art in Dialogue for Adults**
- **Open Workshop** Sundays 10–16.00

INFORMATION AND CONTACT

Further information and download of photographs on www.rietberg.ch

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Opening hours:

Tues – Sun 10.00 – 17.00 | Wed and Thu 10.00 – 20.00

Admission:

adults CHF 16 | reduced CHF 12 | up to the age of 16 free

Access:

Tram 7 (direction Wollishofen) to the «Museum Rietberg» stop (4 stops from «Paradeplatz»). No parking; disabled parking available.