

Press release

Street parade of the gods – Bronze works of art from the villages of India

20th July – 11th November 2012

Several years have passed since the Museum Rietberg last dealt with the subject of Indian “tribal art”. The last few exhibitions were dedicated to Indian court art. “Street parade of the gods” illuminates a region in Central India about the size of Switzerland, which is to this day inhabited mainly by tribal societies, or *adivasi* (“native inhabitants”). The exhibition will stage an impressive parade of some 300 fascinating yellow metal figurines made for ritual purposes by metal casters during the first half of the 20th century.

The exhibition

The exhibition stages a parade of some 300 figurines, deities, horsemen, animals and dancers in a state of trance. They are all from Bastar, an old princely state about the size of Switzerland located in today's Indian State of Chhattisgarh. Approximately two thirds of Bastar's population are members of one of the registered Indian tribes, the so-called “First Settlers” (*adivasi*). Their works of art are therefore called “tribal bronzes”.

The inhabitants of the Dandakaranya region worship an almost inconceivably large number of deities, mainly goddesses. Oftentimes a certain deity would appear to an ancestor of a particular family and demand to be venerated in their house. The head of the family would then commission the local metal caster to create a cult figurine of the god, and would leave it up to the imagination of the experienced artist to choose the appropriate attributes and decorations.

Most of the bronze figurines on display here were donated to the shrine of a particular deity to give thanks to the god for granting a wish. Such bronze figurines used to be sold in the many farmers markets and at large annual festive processions. Metal casters would come from all corners of the region to sell their wares, and each of them had their own characteristic style. Their creative power and technical skill gave rise to such a huge variety of depictions of the same deity.

With their vivid expressions and meaningfully placed ornaments these bronze figures clearly set themselves apart from those of so-called “classical” Indian art. On one hand they were not made until the early 20th century, and on the other they display their own unique aesthetics: their rugged faces are male in appearance, and their unusual attributes and dynamic postures radiate extraordinary power and energy. The key to understanding these artistic traditions, of which very little is known to date, lies in the function and status of these bronze figurines within the religious and social lives of the people.

The cultural context

We can only surmise which individual deities are actually represented in this exhibition. Often, they can only be conclusively identified if their original place of veneration is known.

According to the participants in the rituals the venerated deities are actually present in the figures. The gods are present during the rituals and attend to the requests and woes of their followers. The religious practise is essentially shaped by the belief in the transcending significance and effect of the act of seeing: the gods allow their worshippers to catch a glimpse of them (*darshan dena*), which in turn is received by the devotees (*darshan lena*). By the gods showing themselves, the visual communication between them and their worshippers is opened up – in contrast to the hearing of god's word in the great book religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

The gods are not only present in the cult figures, but also in people, the so-called *sirhas*, male mediums or dancers in a state of trance. One cannot decide to become a *sirha*, it is the deity who picks a medium. Upon being prompted by the believers, the god or goddess will take possession of the *sirha*.

If a *sirha* is representing a female deity, he will wear a long dress and a colourful blouse decorated with cowries and mirrors. The *sirha* of a male god will wear a hip cloth. He will hold attributes of the deity in his hands. If he is representing a wild and powerful goddess, the attribute is often a rope studded with nails which he will use to flagellate himself, or a trident which he uses to pierce his tongue. As he is possessed by the goddess, he is oblivious to pain.

Metal casting

In the Dandakaranya region, figures, jewellery and everyday items are not made by members of the tribal societies but by professional metal casters from the caste of the *ghadvas*.

Using the wax-thread technique, the caster first forms the basic shape of the figurine in clay. He then carefully wraps a network of thin threads of beeswax made with a moulding press around the clay core. Individual parts such as the arms, feet, jewellery and weapons are separately formed in wax and attached to the figurine. He then encases the entire figurine with a thick layer of clay, leaving an open sprue (casting channel).

The materials used for casting are generally metals such as copper and zinc. The metal is heated to melting point in a fire which burns away the wax and the molten metal flows into the hollows left by the wax. Once it has cooled down the caster will smash the clay coating and engrave the figurine.

Until Indian independence in 1947, the princely state of Bastar also included the present-day states of Orissa, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. In search of new clients, metal casters began to travel to neighbouring regions, where they used their artistic originality to express local religious attitudes towards the gods. Over the course of time this led to the evolution of unique local styles in metal art.

Tribal India in the Museum Rietberg

Visitors to the exhibition will be able to see and *experience* a new and surprising world of images. They will discover highly original, beautiful, witty and aesthetically unusual objects: faces that seem to come from another world, armed horsemen, men disguised as goddesses, dancers in a state of trance and gods on swings. The figures on display are all one of a kind and are testament to the ingenuity of the metal casters.

Besides the aesthetic experience, visitors have an opportunity to learn about the various cultural, ritual and religious contexts of the objects. While very little is known about the individual artists, casters, their names or workshops, research in this area is still in its infancy. Considerably more is known about the figurines' presumed ritual purposes as is shown by the impressive catalogue written by Cornelia Mallebrein.

The objects also refer to a bleak reality: the regions where the *adivasi* can retreat to are being increasingly threatened by the rapidly growing Indian economy. The exploitation of the many natural resources (wood, coal, mining, particularly the vast precious metal deposits) forces the *adivasi* to abandon their traditional lifestyles and to earn a living as landless day labourers, and often even as bondsmen. The well-known novelist and activist Arundhati Roy estimates that more than 30 million people have been displaced by the construction of dams alone. Since the 1960s a resistance movement has consolidated itself: a highly motivated guerrilla army in the Bastar region is proving to be a growing challenge for the central government in Delhi.

The profound ecological and cultural changes have a dramatic effect on the local artistic traditions. As early as 1951 Verrier Elwin, one of the best-known researchers on Indian tribal art, stated his regret: "We have begun too late; the great days of the Indian tribesman are gone; all we can do now is to search in the debris for traces of inspiration and scraps of beauty." Almost 40 years later Cornelia Mallebrein, the guest curator of the exhibition, noticed that the casting artists in the Bastar region were now working exclusively for the art market in Delhi. In the same context she noted a "decline" in quality: the figures are no longer produced for religious practice or veneration, and the emotional bond between the gods, the clients and the producers has been completely severed. The casters are no longer conscious of producing a work of art for a goddess but act purely as artisans. The only thing that counts now is the price. New figurines are now being produced on assembly lines in distant Delhi for tourists and collectors, with a new iconography and new designs, far away from the villages.

The Zehnder, Magnenat Ferguson and Kaufmann donations

In 2008 the Museum Rietberg received a donation of more than one hundred tribal bronzes from India. The donors, Jean-Pierre Zehnder and his wife Dorothea, can look back on a forty-year diplomatic career in Europe (Paris, London, Brussels) and overseas. Initially a personal employee with Ambassador Lindt, then ICRC High Commissioner during the Biafran War, Jean-Pierre Zehnder was appointed Swiss ambassador to Zaire, Congo and the Central African Republic in 1984. From 1989 to 1995 he was ambassador to India, where he acquired his collection. During that time the second donor, Janine Magnenat Ferguson, was also working at the Swiss Embassy in New Delhi. In 2009 she donated eight tribal bronzes to the Museum.

In 2010 another important donation of 93 Indian tribal bronzes was made to the Museum by Hans and Heidi Kaufmann. Having spent long periods in Africa and South America, Hans Kaufmann, who was also a diplomat, arrived in India in 1986. He was the commercial attaché to the Austrian Embassy in New Delhi until 1993. During their time in India, Hans and Heidi Kaufmann studied the people as well as the art and culture of India, and acquired a selection of works of folk and tribal art.

All donors were apparently drawn to these wonderful figurines with their remarkable detailing, skilled artisanship and unusual aesthetics. Another thing they have in common was their decision to generously donate their collections to the Museum Rietberg so that they would be preserved and made accessible to the public. With this exhibition, which will put on display one of the most beautiful collections in Europe of bronzes from the Bastar region, the Museum would like to invite its visitors to celebrate this important addition to its collections.

The catalogue

The catalogue is more than a conventional documentation on the collection. The objects have been staged as an actual parade. The illustrated book is impressive thanks to the beautiful composition of the figures and provides an interesting visual experience.

The objects are also put into a classic ethnographic context: Cornelia Mallebrein, the guest curator of the exhibition, is an internationally renowned cultural anthropologist and considered a leading authority on the subject in the German-speaking world. Having spent long periods of time in the Bastar region, she is duly credited with systematically gathering data and conducting research on its art. On 6th July 2012 Ms. Mallebrein will receive the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany for her research and her dedication to the areas of cultural exchange and intercultural communication.

Elefanten, schaukelnde Götter und Tänzer in Trance Bronzekunst aus dem heutigen Indien

Cornelia Mallebrein and Johannes Beltz, edited by Museum Rietberg Zurich, published by Scheidegger & Spiess

Hardback

c. 144 pages with 450 colour illustrations, 23 x 30 cm

ISBN 978-3-85881-356-5, c. CHF 44.– | € 38.–

Activities accompanying the exhibition

Instead of focusing on the aesthetic qualities of its exhibits alone, the Museum Rietberg wishes to place them within a larger contextual framework and thus unlock greater meaning. The activities accompanying the exhibition therefore center on the cultural change prevalent in the area of today's *adivasis*.

Detailed information (German only) on the full accompanying programme with workshops, guided tours, talks and concerts can be found on our website www.rietberg.ch

Information and contact

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

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Hours: Tue–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.

RailAway offer: By train to Museum Rietberg – www.railaway.ch. 10% reduction on train tickets, transfer and admission.