

## Press Release

Sculpted Sound – Stringed Instruments from India

5 September 2014 – 9 August 2015

**In November 2013, the Museum Rietberg acquired a large collection of Indian stringed instruments from a private collector in Germany. This exhibition will feature approximately eighty of the most beautiful instruments from this collection. Intricately made, they are all roughly one hundred years old, while some are even slightly older.**

In an article titled “The Musical Migrant” of 10 November 2013, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported the transfer of one of the most important collections of Indian instruments from Rüsselsheim in Germany to the Museum Rietberg. The museum was able to purchase part of the collection using funds from the Rietberg Circle, while the rest was a gift from the German owner and collector, Bengt Fosshag, a successful illustrator and graphic designer who had amassed this extraordinary collection in the course of decades and was seeking a permanent home for it.

Asked about his history as a collector, Fosshag says that it was a *sarinda*, a lute from Lahore, that prompted him to begin accumulating literature about these exotic stringed instruments in the 1960s. An exhibition of non-European musical instruments at the Münchner Stadtmuseum acquired from a private collection subsequently inspired him to begin collecting similar instruments himself. He purchased stringed instruments in Turkey and Morocco, while a friend brought him a *tar* (long-necked lute) and a dulcimer from Iran.

Over the course of many years, he accumulated one of the most important collections of lutes in Europe. Bengt Fosshag gradually shifted his focus from pieces that were purely musical instruments to “lute sculptures” from India, Nepal, and Afghanistan. For the 1996 exhibition “Mit Haut und Haar”, he donated the majority of his collection to the Linden-Museum and subsequently concentrated on the *dhodro banam* lutes of the East Indian Santal people and on the Nepalese *damyen*, amassing a fabulous collection that now not only enlarges the department of Indian art at the Museum Rietberg, but also adds an entirely new theme to it.

### **The Bengt Fosshag Collection**

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The collection consists of ninety-two instruments, all but nine of which come from India and Nepal. Most of them were built at the beginning or during the first half of the twentieth century. However, precise information about their manufacture, origin, and use is lacking. The most striking instruments in the collection originate from the Santal culture, a tribal community in India.

Among the instrumental sculptures, the *dhodro banam* (“hollow instrument”) and *huka banam* (“coconut instrument”) are the most spectacular items. Both types have almost vanished today and are inexorably supplanted by more modern instruments – a development related to the integration of the Santal into Indian society.

The *dhodro banam* is made of a single piece of wood, which is divided into four equal pieces. The craftsman begins by hollowing out the belly in an oval shape, followed by the chest. The neck is straight and ends in a head, the lower part of which has a hole to receive the string. The *dhodro banam* player holds the instrument vertically with its neck pointing upwards and the playing hand above the bow hand.

The *huka banam* looks similar, but is held the other way around: its neck points downwards while resting against the player's chest and the bow hand above the playing hand. Additionally, the *huka banam* has no tuning peg; the string is knotted to the instrument's neck.

## The Santal People

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India is home to an estimated six to ten million Santal (also known as Santhal, Sontal or Sonthal) who represent the largest indigenous population group recognised as a "tribe" in India. Most Santal live in rural areas in the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and Assam, with additional small groups in neighbouring Bangladesh and Nepal.

They speak their own language, Santali, a member of the Munda subfamily of Austroasiatic languages, which is more closely related to the languages of Southeast Asia than to the major Indian languages. Santali uses both the Latin alphabet and various Indian scripts. The majority of the Santal in West Bengal and adjacent territories make their living in agriculture, although some work in the mines or as day labourers.

Despite the increasing Hinduisation and Christianisation of India, the Santal have their own highest deity (*Thakur* or *Chando*) as well as other deities (*Bonga*), but these have neither holy places nor images. Their myths of origin and their social structure too are unique, differing from those of the Indian caste society. Additionally, the self-assured demeanour of Santal women defies the social conventions of rural India, since they not only take part in cultural life, but also choose their own life partners.

Music is an important part of Santal culture and can be heard everywhere both in everyday life and on festive occasions. The Santal are gifted and passionate dancers and musicians and most of their songs and dances are related to various seasons and phases of life. During the *Baha* blossom festival in spring, it is the custom to invite everyone present to join in the singing and dancing. Transverse flutes made of bamboo are ubiquitous, and at large festivals, iron kettle drums beat to invite neighbouring communities to join in.

## Myths of Origin

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The following legend describes the birth of the *dhodro banam*: Once upon a time there were seven brothers who lived with their sister. One day the sister cut her finger, and the blood ran down onto the vegetables she was preparing. The brothers found the meal to be tasty and thought that if her blood alone was so delicious, her flesh would be even more so. So they decided to kill their sister and eat her. Only the youngest brother did not want to eat of her flesh and hid his portion in an anthill. After some time, a large tree grew on the spot with blossoms that gave off a wondrous sound. One day, a wandering yogi came by and heard this beautiful sound. He marvelled at it and decided to cut a branch from the tree. From the wood he carved the instrument that is called *dhodro banam* today.

A similar legend tells of the origins of the *huka banam*.

Once there were seven brothers who killed and ate their sister. The youngest brother would not touch his portion, but buried it in a spot from which, later, a melodiously sounding tree began to grow. A wandering yogi made a musical instrument from one branch of the melodious tree.

One day, without knowing it, the yogi arrived in the village where the seven brothers lived. He went begging from door to door and asked for rice. When he came to the house where the brothers lived, his instrument began to sing: "... *this one belongs to sinners* ..." When the brothers heard the song of the instrument they were greatly afraid, for its sound was like their sister's voice.

So they invited the yogi into their house. In secret they made a copy of the instrument and exchanged the two instruments without the yogi's knowledge. Then they threw the yogi out of their home on the pretext that he had made their house dirty.

## The Exhibition

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The title "Sculpted Sound" expresses the important relationship between the body, the music, and the musical instrument. The instruments are presented in settings that enhance their aura as resonant sculptures. The exhibition designers were concerned less with creating a conspectus of the instruments in the collection than with staging a presentation that frees them from the rigid confines of

the display case, preferring to suspend them from strings that allow them to float in space like musical notes or weightless sounds. In this way, the visitor's eye is directed towards the imaginative carvings and unusual shapes of the instruments and towards the innovative interplay of their parts, all of which reflect the creativity of their builders.

“Sculpted Sound” is the first special exhibition at Museum Rietberg that will run for almost a year. This will allow enough time for such activities as a collaboration with the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum in New Delhi, India, which will involve several working visits by Indian researchers to Zurich as well as the publication of an expanded English version of the catalogue. The purpose of this collaboration is to acquire more information about the cultural, historical, and art history background of the instruments on display here. Without the help and close cooperation of Indian museum staff as well as field research in India, it would be impossible to locate individual instrument builders and their workshops or to interpret the iconographic details. Thus a scientific study of the Fosshag Collection has yet to be carried out and the present publication and the exhibition represent important preliminary steps on the road to a deeper understanding of these instruments. The exhibition will also be accompanied by a number of events, workshops, concerts, and lectures.

## **Catalogue in German**

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Klang / Körper – Saiteninstrumente aus Indien, Hrsg. Johannes Beltz, Marie Eve Celio, Museum Rietberg Zürich. Mit Beiträgen von Marie Eve Celio, Bengt Fosshag, Albert Lutz, Ludwig Pesch. Broschur, Fadenheftung, 80 S., über 90 Abb. (farbig), 23 x 30 cm. ISBN 978-3-907077-54-2. Verkaufspreis während der Ausstellung: CHF 28 | 23 EUR, erscheint im September 2014.

## **Guided Tours and Workshops**

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**Public guided tours in German:** every Saturday, 2 p.m.

**Private tours** (German, French, or English): please call +41 44 415 31 31

For **workshops** (in German) for public audiences and schools, visit [www.rietberg.ch/kunstvermittlung](http://www.rietberg.ch/kunstvermittlung).

## **Exhibition Credits**

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### **Exhibition Curator**

Dr. Johannes Beltz (director)

Dr. Marie Eve Celio Scheurer (assistant)

### **Exhibition design**

Martin Sollberger

### **Installations**

Walter Frei

Jean Claude Plattner

Marc Zünd

### **Lighting**

Rainer Wolfsberger

### **Multimedia**

Masus Meier

**Graphic Design (exhibition)**

Jacqueline Schöb (director)

Stefanie Beilstein (intern)

**Graphic Design (print products)**

Raffinerie AG für Gestaltung

**Graphic Design (catalogue)**

Thomas Röder

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Monica Stocker

Andrina Sarott (intern)

**Events**

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## **Information and Contact**

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Downloadable information (text and images) at [www.rietberg.ch/press](http://www.rietberg.ch/press)

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### **Opening hours**

Tue–Sun 10–17h

Wed 10–20h

### **Entrance fees**

Adults: CHF 18 | discounted: CHF 14

Admission free for children and adolescents 16 and under

### **How to find us**

Tram no. 7 (direction Wollishofen) to the “Museum Rietberg” stop (four stops from Paradeplatz).  
No onsite parking; parking for disabled persons available.