

PRESS RELEASE

Performing Masks

Swiss Carnival – Indian Rituals

A presentation of two mask collections that could not be more different

The Museum Rietberg is famous for its collection of rare and valuable masks from all over the world. Under the title “Performing Masks”, two mask collections are now being exhibited: ritual masks from southern India and Carnival masks from Switzerland. The latter are part of one of the oldest collections in the museum. It is more than forty years since all the Swiss masks were exhibited together and now this important part of the museum’s permanent collection is on display again. The Indian ritual masks, on the other hand, have only been acquired recently. In a special exhibition they are being shown to the public for the first time.

Carnival Masks from Switzerland

New Presentation of the Collection in the Villa Wesendonck

Butzi, *Chrottni*, *Tschäggätä*, *Rinderi* and *Schlumpf* – these are some of the names of the masks that make mischief at carnivals.

The Museum Rietberg possesses the most important collection of old Swiss masks in the world. All of the masks here have been much used and they thus provide a valuable testimony to Swiss folk traditions. Part of the museum's permanent collection, but not on display for some time, the masks are now being exhibited again. Among the most important places in Switzerland for carnivals are Sarganserland in the Canton of St Gallen, Central Switzerland, and the Lötsch Valley in the Canton of Wallis. They all have their own mask traditions.

In Flums in Sarganserland the masks are called *Butzi*. They often represent a particular person whose physiognomy is exaggerated in order to ridicule him. Inspiration is often taken from eccentrics in the community, people who live outside social conventions. They often have some physical oddity which lends itself to caricature. Many of these creations have become established types in the mask repertoire of Sarganserland. They have names such as "Chrottni", "Schlumpf" or "Rinderi". Even though the masks are meant as a form of mockery, their expressions are always sweetly innocent.

Nowhere does caricature go as far as in Central Switzerland, where the detailed carving of faces becomes mocking parody. Here, in contrast to other regions, we encounter a panorama of human images of remarkable diversity.

Probably the most famous carnival figures are the *Tschäggätä* from the Lötsch Valley. They wear enormous, hideous masks characterised by their expressive form which depicts the abnormal, the non-human. Thus the large carvings represent fantasy figures and not portraits of particular people.

At the end of the 19th century the imposing wooden masks of the *Tschäggätä* attracted the attention of ethnologists and became popular objects of study. Some scholars even thought that they revealed the existence of secret societies of young men which had preserved a thousand-year-old cultural heritage – thus a myth was born!

Publications

Judith Rickenbach, *Alte Masken aus der Innerschweiz. Fastnachtmasken aus der Sammlung des Rietbergmuseums*, 1996.

Werner Bellwald, *Alte Masken aus dem Lötschental. Fastnachtmasken aus der Sammlung des Rietbergmuseums*, 1999.

Judith Rickenbach (ed.), *Alte Masken aus der Ostschweiz. Fastnachtmasken aus der Sammlung des Rietbergmuseums*, 2000.

Curator and Project Manager:

Judith Rickenbach, curator of the departments of Pre-Colombian America, Ancient Orient, and Swiss Masks, Museum Rietberg Zürich

When masks dance – Bronze art from southern India

17 May – 18 October 2009, Novartis Gallery

In Tulunadu, a rural coastal region in southern India which encompasses parts of the states of Karnataka and Kerala, people have been worshipping Butas, local gods, protective spirits and heroes for many centuries.

In 2007 the Museum Rietberg received a gift of more than fifty Buta masks and sculptures from Heidi and Hans Kaufmann. Thanks to this gift a special exhibition can be dedicated to the underexplored theme of “folk art”. The artefacts which represent Butas are produced to this day and still used in rituals. None of those on display are more than a hundred years old.

These Buta masks belong to the Hindu folk religion which differs from Brahmin Hinduism in its gods and practices. Particularly spectacular are the large Buta animal masks such as the mask of the buffalo demon *Maisandaye*, the tiger *Pillichamundi* or the wild boar *Panjurli*. The exhibition also shows the complete “costume” of a performer: the huge, elaborate headgear, often several metres in height, attached to the performer’s back, the symbols of the god such as a bell or sword, and the beautiful decorations on the head and arms. Fascinating field photos and a documentary film trace the production and use of the masks and convey a powerful impression of this ritual theatre tradition which has remained alive in southern India to this day.

The cultural context: ritual theatre in southern India

The exhibited masks are worn at particular festivals by professional performers who embody the gods. At first they fall into a trance, then they become possessed by the gods. As gods they can receive sacrifices and grant wishes, resolve conflicts, pass judgement, heal the sick and strengthen power relations in the village.

There are two ways in which the masks are worn: the mask either covers the face of the performer entirely or is worn over the head on an elaborate frame attached to the performer’s back. Masks are consecrated and venerated at the altar or in a specially-made swing, before they are donned for the ritual performance in which they have a specific place.

The mask performances are linked to fascinating myths which are narrated in songs sung by men and women during the festival. Learned by heart and passed down orally from generation to generation, they describe the birth of the deity, and all the obstacles he has overcome. They tell of heroes and their courage and their fight against social injustice which often brings them into mortal danger. Since the performers frequently come from less privileged social classes, their songs often express the sorrow of the oppressed or even contain protests against the ruling castes.

Publications

The exhibition is accompanied by a German catalogue. The Indian painter, sculptor and folklorist Balan Nambiar presents the first accessible introduction to the manufacture and use of the masks in Tulunadu, and illustrates his essay with stunning photographs. In the same volume, the renowned German indologist and Tulu specialist Heidrun Brückner provides the first complete German translation of the song of the buffalo god *Maisandaye*. Thus she makes available to a wide readership a text that was originally only known as part of an oral tradition. The catalogue is complemented by a monograph by Heidrun Brückner which will be published simultaneously in German and English by Otto Harrassowitz in Wiesbaden.

Curator and project manager

Dr. Johannes Beltz, curator for art from South and Southeast Asia, Museum Rietberg Zürich

Events

The exhibition will be accompanied by a full supporting programme of events. Beside a lecture, two book launches and a concert, there will be a workshop on Indian bronze-casting. The southern Indian bronze caster Rajesh Acharya explains and demonstrates how masks are modelled and cast. He will show the elaborate procedure in all its stages: making the wax model, mixing the materials for the mould, applying the clay mixture, preparing the crucible to melt the metal, and finally the spectacular casting itself.

There will also be a one-week workshop led by the Zurich-based jewellery designer and bronze caster Johanna Dahm in which participants will produce their own jewellery using the traditional lost wax technique. Both artists will work in creative collaboration and share their experience and knowledge: a true Swiss-Indian co-production.

Sun, 17 May 2009, 11am, Lecture hall Park-Villa Rieter

Among Spirits and Gods. Research, stories and images from the west coast of southern India, Heidrun Brückner, Sarah Geng and Sina Sommer, University of Würzburg

Sun, 7 June 2009, 11am, Lecture hall Park-Villa Rieter

Dhrupad Concert: Indian vocal music with Umakant and Ramakant Gundecha

Sun, 12 July 2009, 11am, Lecture hall Park-Villa Rieter

“Same same, but different”. Book launch and illustrated talk with Prof. Johanna Dahm and Prof. Dr. Hans Peter Hahn

Sat, 11 July – Sun, 19 July 2009

Casting with the lost wax technique. Workshop with Rajesh Acharya and Johanna Dahm

General information

Information, texts and images available at www.rietberg.ch

Museum Rietberg Zürich | Gablerstrasse 15 | CH-8002 Zürich

T. + 41 44 206 31 31 | F. + 41 44 206 31 32 | Recorded information: T + 41 44 206 31 00

museum.rietberg@zuerich.ch | www.rietberg.ch

Opening hours: Tue to Sun 10 am–5 pm | Wed and Thu 10 am–8 pm

Public holidays: Whit Monday, 1 June, 10 am–5 pm

Entrance: Adults CHF 16 | concessions CHF 12
Under-16s free

Guided tours (in German): Sun 2 pm

Private guided tours on request: T. + 41 44 206 31 31 / 11

Further events www.rietberg.ch

Open workshop: Sun 10 am–4 pm. Further activities available for children, families and adults from the education department, see www.rietberg.ch

Directions: Tram 7 to Wollishofen, stop “Museum Rietberg” (4 stops after Paradeplatz). No parking; disabled parking available.