

When masks dance – Bronze art from southern India



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.

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

Information on the exhibition

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

Exhibition designer and architect Martin Sollberger

Public relations Katharina Epprecht, Christine Ginsberg

Hours Tue to Sun 10 am to 5 pm, Wed and Thurs 10 am to 8 pm

Admission CHF 16 / CHF 12 Youth up to 16 years free of charge

Guided tours in German Sun 2 pm

Private tours by appointment, call 044 206 31 11 / 31

Crafts workshop Every Sunday 10 am to 4 pm (for children, adults, and families)

Directions Tram 7 to the stop "Museum Rietberg" (4 stops from Paradeplatz), bus 33 to "Hügelstrasse" or suburban train to Bahnhof Enge. No parking spaces. The museum can be accessed by wheel-chair. Parking for the disabled.