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 Pillachamundi or the wild boar Panjurli. The exhibition also shows the complete “costume” of a performer: the huge, elaborate headdress, 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 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 injustices 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.

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.

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 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.

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Exhibition designer and architect Martin Sollberger
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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 wheelchair. Parking for the disabled.