Exhibition Project

Alice from Switzerland — a visionary artist and scholar between two continents

An exhibition about the Swiss Artist Alice Boner (1889–1981)
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Curators: Dr. Johannes Beltz and M. A. Andrea Kuratli, Museum Rietberg Zurich

First venue: Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai (former Prince of Wales Museum)
Last venue: Museum Rietberg Zurich
Period of exhibition: 2014 / 2018
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1. Alice Boner: A short introduction

Alice Boner (1889–1981) is without any doubt one of the most fascinating but relatively little known Swiss artists of the 20th century. Born in Italy, she studied painting and sculpture in Brussels and Basel. At the age of 27 she was invited to realize an exhibition in Zurich’s prestigious Kunsthau. In 1926 she saw the famous Indian dancer Uday Shankar performing in Zurich, which became the symbolic point of no return in her career. She met him again in 1929 and traveled to India with him to support his troupe. She managed his successful company for a few years before she settled in Varanasi where she spent almost her entire life.

Boner not only was an artist herself, she also was interested in various art forms she discovered in India. Furthermore she started learning Sanskrit and studied Indian temple architecture and sculptures. During these studies she discovered a new aspect of Indian art. Alice Boner explored the Indian visual imagery by the dynamics of composition and structure. The search for the hidden meaning of sacred art determined her academic career.

For her work Alice Boner was awarded an honorary doctor by the University of Zurich in 1969 and the “Padma Bhushan” by the President of India in 1974.
2. Conceptual framework

The main idea of the exhibition is to show how Alice Boner promoted cultural knowledge and understanding between East and West and the crucial role of the visual within it. Her close friend Alfred Wurfel once said: “If it is true that culture is a vehicle of international understanding and those promoting it are its ambassadors, then Alice Boner, indeed, deserves to be called an Ambassador of Indian culture!”

Alice Boner as cultural ambassador

Alice Boner’s work brings to our attention the world view of a young, well educated and emancipated Swiss woman. She was one of the first and few European women living in India from the 1930ies onwards. Her diaries and photographs permit to study her perceptions of India in detail. In addition she was well connected with numerous celebrities in the field of politics, culture, music and art: She not only met Ananda Coomaraswamy, Heinrich Zimmer, C.G. Jung and Alauddin Khan but also Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. As such the exhibition offers a fascinating inside into modern Indian history.

Alice Boner studied and appreciated visual and performative arts in India: Through her publications, and her collection of miniature paintings and sculptures she transferred academic and visual knowledge from India to Europe. Furthermore she promoted the classical Indian arts like music and dance in Europe: She managed the troupe of Uday Shankar and later on also supported dancers like Shanta Rao and Tanjore Balasaraswati. Also in India Alice Boner had a leading role in reviving the ancient dance forms. One example is the Kerala Kala Mandalam school for Kathakali that came into life with her help.
3. Content of the exhibition

The exhibition will be based on Alice Boner’s photographs and illustrated with her artistic creations as well as personal documents, most of them kept and preserved in the Museum Rietberg in Zurich.

3.1. Themes of the exhibition

Background information: Her Life and Work
Alice Boner the Artist
Performing Arts: Dance and Music
Architecture and Science
Cultural Ambassador
Reception

3.2. What is to be seen?

The exhibition will contain a selection of about 100 photographs and additionally aquarelles, oil paintings, drawings and sculptures made by the artist. Personal documents like diaries and letters will help to generate context. The exact number of objects will be defined later on. Since the exhibition is planned as a traveling exhibition, its architecture and content should permit repeatable and easy mounting and dismantling. The exhibition will contain a certain number of original documents. However, the majority of the photographs will be reproductions.

It is planned to include some silent black and white film made by Alice Boner together with Uday and Rajendra Shankar in the 1930ies.
4. Catalogue, postcards

The exhibition will be accompanied by an illustrated English catalogue, which could later or simultaneously be translated in any Indian language and German. The catalogue should not exceed 50 pages. It will contain a nicely written essay on Alice Boner as well as an elaborate ABC Glossary combined with reproductions of Alice Boner’s photographs and drawings. The authors are the curators of the exhibition Dr. Johannes Beltz and M.A. Andrea Kuratli. The catalogue is designed by the well known Swiss book designer Franziska Burkhardt, who received several international book awards in the past.

The authors will provide the ready for print manuscript as well as all images in high resolution. The print and production of the catalogue will be realized under the auspices of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (in the following referred to as CSMVS) Museum in Mumbai.

The CSMVS could produce and sell a series of postcards on Alice Boner. In addition a selected number of images shown in the exhibition could be used for souvenir products, as motives for textiles etc. All reproduction rights will be included in the mutual agreement signed by the two institutions.
The young Ravi Shankar playing Sitar, 1930/34

The Uday Shankar dance group on stage (Ravi and Uday Shankar, Kedar Chowdhury, Ananda Charan Bhattacharya) and Baran Timir, 1931/34

Uday Shankar and Simkie performing Krishna and Radha, 1928

Kedar Chowdhury plays the pakhanaj, photograph by "Sasha", 1930/38

Uday Shankar and Simkie performing Krishna and Radha, 1938

Amala Nandi and Kanaklata Chowdhury performing mudras, photograph by H. Hifland, 1930/38
5. Other venues

The exhibition will be made in a way that it can be easily adapted to a variety of space requirements.

in India:
The Museum Rietberg would be happy if the exhibition travels throughout India and is shown in other Indian museums or galleries. Possible venues are: New Delhi, Varanasi, Bhubaneswar, Pune, Mangalore, Bangalore and Gangtok.
The Museum in Mumbai is very welcome to initiate any further project or itinerary.

in Switzerland:
After its tour in India the exhibition will travel to Switzerland. Possible venues are the Museo delle Culture in Lugano, the Museum Langmatt in Baden and the Museum Rietberg in Zurich.

Alice Boner and her sister Georgette Boner travel in a bullock car to Vijayanagara, in her diaries she recalls to have appreciated “this slow vehicle because it matches perfectly with the wide and beautiful landscape”, 1938.

Alice Boner embarks on an airplane in Denmark, 1931.

Alice Boner’s friend P. K. Mittra called Montu, 1951–53.
It would be ideal to invite a number of first-class artists to perform in the CSMVS and the Museum Rietberg during the period of the exhibition. Since Alice Boner was so dedicated to Indian classical dance, theater, and music, it would be desirable to host a series of Kathakali performances and concerts in her name.

Also, it would be suitable to invite eminent art historians to lecture on Alice Boner or on related issues as temple architecture.

Alice Boner takes the young Ravi Shankar to the otolaryngologist Dr. Kistler; he had his surgery in Zurich's main street (Bahnhofstrasse), 1931/32

Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore with Uday Shankar and Haren Ghosh in Shantiniketan, 1935/36

Alice Boner with Pandit Sharma, the erudite Sanskrit scholar and expert in Indian temple sculpture, Puri, 1957
Exhibition Project — Alice Boner

7. Budget

No specific fees for the takeover of the exhibition will be charged by the Museum Rietberg. The total exhibition budget will include the following positions:

a) Reproduction of original photographs
b) Production of exhibition modules
c) Local production of wall mounts, labels
d) Project management in India, coordination of venues; supervision
e) Travel costs of couriers in India
f) Travel to and accommodation costs in Mumbai of the Swiss team
g) PR material as catalogue, postcards etc.
h) Opening ceremonies, gallery talks, events

As soon as all venues are reconfirmed, a proper budget will be submitted.
The Museum Rietberg considers the Alice Boner exhibition as a joint venture between the two institutions Museum Rietberg Zurich and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai. It means that the curatorial work by Dr. Johannes Beltz and M. A. Andrea Kuratli is included in the exchange agreement between the two institutions and needs no further remuneration.

In addition, the Museum Rietberg provides the exhibition’s design and architecture. The layout of the exhibition will be developed by the Museum Rietberg in-house designer Martin Sollberger. The production of the exhibition will be carried out in India. We could also imagine a cooperation in the field of related exhibition products such as flyers, posters, etc.

The Alice Boner Project is partially sponsored by the “Boner Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur” and the Association for the preservation of the audiovisual heritage of Switzerland MEMORIAV. With their help, the collection was made accessible to the public and can be edited for this exhibition. Further requests for sponsoring are still pending.

Uday Shankar in the cave temples of Ellora, 1929/30

Uday Shankar in front of the famous Buddhist stupa in Sanchi, 1930

Uday Shankar studies the relief of Vishnu sleeping on the serpent Adishesha, Mahaballipuram, 1930
9. Further references


www.sammlungrietberg.ch
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