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Split, Donate, and Export

Alice Boner's efforts to
preserve her art collection
in India and Switzerland

A significant part of the Indian collections at Museum Rietberg are courtesy of a generous donation made by Alice Boner (1889–1981). This versatile artist, scholar, and patron was born in the Italian town of Legnano (Lombardy). Her father, Georg Boner, was an engineer with BBC.¹ This fact is not insignificant for her chosen path in life. It afforded the financial security and prosperity that enabled Alice Boner to pursue her artistic ambitions without undue worry. From 1907 to 1911, Alice Boner studied painting in Brussels, Munich, and Basel and held her first sculpture exhibition in 1916 at the Kunsthaus Zürich. In 1929–30, she went on a trip to India with the Indian dancer Uday Shankar. In the following period, from 1930 to 1935, she directed his dance company. After parting ways with the Uday Shankar troupe, Alice Boner settled in India in 1935 and from 1936 rented a house in Varanasi on the Ganges, in Assi Ghat, where she was to live for almost 40 years and where the Alice Boner Institute (ABI) is today. During her stay there, she amassed a considerable collection of paintings, manuscripts, textiles, sculptures, and bronzes. She donated some of the collection to the National Museum in New Delhi, the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art in Kolkata, and the Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum at the Banaras Hindu University. There are other, smaller groups of objects at the ABI. Most of the collection, however, is owned by Museum Rietberg in Zurich.² This text examines the criteria by which Alice Boner

1 Her mother, Alice Katherine Brown, was the sister of Charles E. L. Brown, the founder of the successful company BBC (Brown, Boveri & Cie.) Now known as ABB, the company is still a leader in the field of electrical engineering, particularly energy and automation technology.

2 See also Beltz and Kuratli 2016 and 2017, Beltz 2002 and Beltz in print.

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acquired and distributed her works of art in India and how she exported parts of her collection to Switzerland.

Building the collection in India

Alice Boner's guiding principle, which characterizes her artistic work as well as her cultural and academic activity, was to look beyond the external appearance of the works of art and decipher their inner meaning.³ On her many research trips throughout India, she repeatedly acquired objects that captured her attention. At the beginning of her diary for her second trip to India in 1934, there is an entry about the acquisition of three Kolam masks, which she bought on October 31, 1934, during a stopover in Colombo.⁴ She wrote: "I bought three masks and sent them to Calcutta. One is magnificent, the head of a hero with an alert face, wide open eyes and charming side-burns; above it, a fantastic headdress."⁵ §1

This passion for objects, forms, colors, and motifs also shaped everyday life in her house in Varanasi, where she lived and worked: If you look at the interior views of the house, you will see carefully arranged works of art. Just like in a museum, she placed and mounted paintings, figures, textiles, and vessels on stairs, in alcoves, or on walls. These works were not merely decorative for her, but an essential, indispensable part of her home and studio as well as her library §2.

Alice Boner's art collection also reflects her particular interest in Hindu philosophy and mythology; this was less academic in nature and more an expression of her personal spirituality. She spoke to certain figures of gods in her collection, such as a bronze of the god Krishna, as if they were living people. He had his own altar, from which he smiled upon her, encouraged her, and gave her strength and consolation.⁶

Only a few of the purchase documents for the works in her collection have survived, so very little is known about Alice Boner's buying habits. The source material refers to acquisitions from established galleries in Mathura, Delhi, and Amritsar, from traveling dealers in Varanasi, or from street vendors on her various trips through India.⁷ She did not plan her purchases far in advance. Rather, she responded to the offer that was presented to her and followed her own eye. Often, one detail was enough to arouse her interest.

Alice Boner's collection can be divided into six object-types: paintings, textiles, palm-leaf manuscripts, stone sculptures, wood carvings, and bronzes. In the realm of painting, Alice was predominantly interested in miniatures: "In the Indian miniature, at its best, the essence of a world is concentrated on a surface no bigger than the palm of one's hand [...]. One small miniature will reveal more truth and inner beauty with the passing of time. It is an inexhaustible fount of messages, unfolding one after another from the intimate thought captured within it. It is this that makes it so precious, much more than the exquisite workmanship, color,

3 See Beltz and Kurath 2013.

4 Alice Boner donated these together with five other Kolam masks to Museum Rietberg (RVI 2306SL–RVI 2313SL) in 1971. See the exhibition *Masken: Gesichter aus anderen Welten*, and Beltz 2003b.

5 Quote: Boner, Soni, and Soni 1993, p. 225.

6 In her diary entries, there are many references to conversations that she had with her "Krishnaji"; Boner, Soni, and Soni 1993, p. 112, 126, 136, 138, 184, 195, and 207; see also Pal 2015, p. 89, and Hawley 2020.

7 Museum Rietberg, Zürich, document archive, Alice Boner's estate, AB.01-03, ~~and~~ invoices from art dealers.

8 Diary entry from February 7, 1956, Boner, Soni, and Soni 1993, p. 201.

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and gold.”⁸ She bequeathed around 600 pictures of this genre to Museum Rietberg. They formed the beginning of a now very important collection of Indian miniature paintings at the museum §4.

The acquisition of textiles was closely connected to the collecting of paintings: Alice Boner discovered the so-called Chamba Rumals, embroidered silk or cotton cloths, in Amritsar, in connection with Pahari painting. These artistically designed textiles complemented her collection of Pahari pictures §3.⁹

From the 1940s onward, Alice Boner bought an entire series of illustrated palm-leaf manuscripts from Odisha.¹⁰ In keeping with her growing interest in Indian temples, she acquired palm leaf manuscripts on Indian temple architecture. These acquisitions dated back to her acquaintance with Pandit Shiva Rath Sharma, who supported her in her research. As she was of the opinion that research work should be carried out onsite, these manuscripts remained in Varanasi: some of them are now in the Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum, others are in the ABI archives.

When collecting sculptures, Alice Boner was guided neither by classification, nor by regional or stylistic emphases,¹¹ but rather by her personal taste and the respective offer. As with paintings, she did not acquire monumental or spectacular masterpieces, but preferred smaller objects that were more fragmentary in character. Was it because she was able to transport them easily on her travels? Or did she buy these pieces as models and inspiration for her own pictures?¹² For Alice, these fragments held a deep, very personal meaning, as this little anecdote illustrates: When the art dealer Chhotelal Bharany asked during a visit to Varanasi what she found so special about these fragments, her succinct answer was: “Chhote, they breathe.”¹³

Division and legal issues

At the end of the Second World War, at the latest, Alice Boner was grappling with the thought of what would happen to the collection after her death. It should have become clear to her that her collection of sculptures could only be removed from India with great difficulty §5. The Antiquities Export Control Act of 1947 prohibited the export of archaeological objects, which undoubtedly included her sculptures. Alice Boner initially decided to give parts of her collection away to Indian museums.

In 1957, she donated a group of terracotta figures to the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art in Kolkata, India's first university museum. The figures originally came from Rajghat in Varanasi and were discovered

⁸ In 1989, Museum Rietberg received 11 Chamba Rumals from Georgette Boner (RVI 637 to RVI 647). In 1991, she donated two more Rumals to the museum (RVI 653 and RVI 65); see the reference to the dealers by Fischer 1994, p. 29.

¹⁰ A particularly beautiful example is the *Perlenkette des Geliebten* [the Beloved's Pearl Necklace] (Rasika Haravali), which Georgette Boner gave to the museum; see Fischer and Pathy 1990.

¹¹ Elsy Leuzinger characterized her collection in the following way: “The sculptures in the Boner collection belong to both classical and medieval styles from India. They are mostly fragments from temples and gates, but they are ones that reflect the essence of Indian art, be it through a fine face or the fleet movement of a delicately chiseled body.” Quoted from: Tacier-Eugster 2019, p. 225.

¹² Eberhard Fischer observed that it was often “certain details” in Indian miniatures that prompted Alice Boner to buy one for her collection. In her work on the Triptych she made dozens of preliminary sketches, in which she reconciled “her own experiences with influences from the Indian art tradition” (Fischer, 1994, p. 168).

¹³ Bharany 2014, p. 52.

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after 1940, during the construction of the railway. Alice Boner gave part of this archaeological find to the museum for conservation and academic research.¹⁴

In contrast to archaeological cultural assets, sculptures, bronzes, paintings, textiles, and photographs continued to be regarded as commodities.¹⁵ They appeared to have no religious value in comparison to the figures of gods that had once been consecrated and venerated in a temple. Alice Boner was probably acting in line with this assessment when she gradually transferred her collection of Indian paintings to Switzerland after the war.

With the founding of Museum Rietberg in 1952, a new cultural institution had emerged in Zurich, which aroused Alice Boner's interest. She cultivated an increasingly friendly relationship with Elsy Leuzinger, who headed the museum as its director from 1956. From as early as 1958, the two corresponded extensively, also about her collection.¹⁶ Their mutual appreciation of one another was undoubtedly a key element in Alice Boner's later transfer of large parts of her collection to Museum Rietberg.

Donated and exported to Museum Rietberg

By 1968 at the latest, Alice Boner's application for the export of her objets d'art had officially been submitted to the Indian government. The Indian Ministry of Culture, particularly the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), examined the submitted photographic documentation of the collection. The Swiss Embassy in New Delhi supported her in her endeavor.¹⁷ An initial interim decision by the Indian authorities, which was sent on by the Swiss Ambassador Marcel Heimo, was positive. He told her that, in principle, there was no objection to export, as the museum was known in India and held in high regard.¹⁸ The condition was that no unique items were sent to Switzerland, i.e., objects that were not present in a similar form in Indian museums.

Elsy Leuzinger informed the Zurich City Council that Alice Boner would bequeath her collection to Museum Rietberg.¹⁹ In Dr. August R. Lindt, the then Swiss ambassador to India, both Alice Boner and Elsy Leuzinger found a prominent supporter of their plans to export these works of art.²⁰

In a letter to Elsy Leuzinger, Lindt confirmed the possibility of a definitive donation.²¹ In October 1970, the Indian authorities issued the go-ahead for all of the small objects recorded in the photographic

14 Museum Rietberg, Zurich, document archive, AB.01-03, letter from the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art to Alice Boner, August 14, 1957.

15 The export of contemporary everyday articles and handicrafts also remained straightforward. Alice Boner had put together a collection of 24 musical instruments in India, which she initially unsuccessfully offered to the Museum of Ethnology in Basel. After this rejection, she offered the instruments to the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich as a gift and transferred them to Zurich, see Museum Rietberg, Zurich, document archive, AB.01-03, A Steimann to Alice Boner, January 29, 1950.

16 Museum Rietberg, Zurich, document archive, AB.02-04, Alice Boner to Elsy Leuzinger, November 29, 1958.

17 For example, she gave her permission for her sculptures to be temporarily housed in the embassy in New Delhi, if necessary. Museum Rietberg, Zurich, document archive, AB.02-04, Alice Boner to Paul A. Ramseyer, May 5, 1968.

18 Museum Rietberg, Zurich, document archive, AB.02-04, Ambassador Marcel Heimo to Alice Boner, March 3, 1969.

19 Museum Rietberg, Zurich, document archive, AB.02-04, Elsy Leuzinger to Dr. August R. Lindt, July 18, 1969; Alice Boner to Elsy Leuzinger, November 26, 1969.

20 Museum Rietberg, Zurich, document archive, AB.02-04, Elsy Leuzinger to A. R. Lindt, June 12, 1970.

21 Museum Rietberg, Zurich, document archive, AB.02-04, Ambassador August R. Lindt to Elsy Leuzinger, July 14, 1970.

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documentation; only for a few large objects did they insist on examining the originals, and this was to take place in the Swiss embassy in New Delhi. On November 16, 1970, the packaged objects were transported to New Delhi. The ASI gave its verbal agreement on December 30, 1970. Four months later, in April 1971, the final written approval was issued. However, the pieces were still unable to leave the country as they had to be cleared.²² In July 1971, the Indian Ministry of Finance finally approved the export of the collection.²³ And on August 25, 1971, Alice Boner confirmed to Ambassador Lindt that her collection had arrived in Kloten the day before. Museum Rietberg's inventory and annual report from 1971 list 38 Indian terracottas, 76 stone sculptures, a relief from Nepal, a demon mask from Tibet, and eight masks from Ceylon.²⁴

Inheritance planning

Given her advanced age and her ultimate return to Switzerland, Alice Boner decided to set up a foundation.²⁵ She wanted to ensure that her research on Indian art history would be continued in India. Boner was primarily concerned with working on the written sources, namely the basic texts on architecture, sculpture, and painting, as these writings were then largely only available as palm-leaf manuscripts in Sanskrit. She wanted this body of work to be available to a wider audience by having it translated. The Austrian religious scholar, Bettina Bäumer, became the research director of the newly founded ABI in Varanasi in 1979.

One of Bettina Bäumer's first tasks was to document the remaining works of art in the ABI.²⁶ Alice Boner had planned that small, minor objects should occasionally be transported to Zurich in hand luggage, while important objects should be bequeathed to the National Museum in New Delhi after her death.²⁷ However, she changed her plans in 1979 and had 16 stone sculptures, 23 metal objects, and 26 terracotta figures from the ABI gifted to the Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum. This was probably a strategic decision, as the museum was part of the Banaras Hindu University, with whose professors both Alice Boner and Bettina Bäumer had formed close ties. After Alice Boner's death, further objects went on permanent loan to the museum.²⁸

22 Alice Boner wrote a letter to Ambassador Lindt in which she commented on the value of her collection, saying that she had acquired the objects 20 to 30 years ago; that is, from 1940 to 1950. Although the value had almost certainly increased, she wanted to insure the collection for INR 100,000; Museum Rietberg, Zürich, document archive AB.02-04. Alice Boner to Ambassador Lindt, November 16, 1970. The collection was officially valued at CHF 150,000 in 1971, but the real value was probably much higher.

23 Alice Boner had to declare that she had paid for the artworks with imported foreign currency. The Indian authorities then waived the collection of gift and capital taxes.

24 Tacier-Eugster 2019, p.223; see also Museum Rietberg's inventory book, Museum Rietberg, Zürich, document archive

25 On August 21, 1981 the Alice Boner Foundation for Fundamental Research in Indian Art was founded in Vaduz. The board members were Georgette Boner, Dr. Alex Vannod, Dr. Eberhard Fischer, B. K. Tripathi, and Werner Strub. In 2009, the foundation merged with the Boner Foundation for Art and Culture.

26 India's Protection of Antiquities Act of 1972 had not only banned the export of works of art, but also regulated the legitimate possession of works of art in India. It required all privately owned antiquities to be registered.

27 Museum Rietberg, Zürich, document archive, AB.01-03. Alice Boner to Bettina Bäumer, November 27, 1979.

28 119 terracotta figures, 8 stone sculptures, 15 metal objects, and several palm-leaf manuscripts together with the artists own works (5 bronzes, 9 oil paintings, 11 watercolors, 13 sketches, and drawings), Museum Rietberg, Zürich, document archive AB.01-03, lists of objects signed by O. P. Tandon; AB.01-03, Georgette Boner to O. P. Tandon, June 6, 1989.

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In 1989, on her 100th birthday, the Alice Boner Gallery was posthumously opened in her memory at the Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum.²⁹ Personal documents, her artwork, and Indian stone sculptures are exhibited in the gallery. With the opening of the gallery, all previous loans came into the possession of the museum.³⁰ A few sculptures and paintings can still be seen today at the ABI in Varanasi.

It is worth noting that Alice Boner kept her collection of paintings and textiles with her until the end of her life. Although she had made continuous verbal promises to donate them to the museum, it was finally her sister, Georgette Boner (1903–1998), who, after Alice's death, gave the pictures to the museum in blocks (over 600 pictures) from 1982 onward.³¹ In 1992, with the permission of the ASI, the last 30 pictures were sent from the Bharat Kala Bhavan to Museum Rietberg.

Meaning and effect

Collecting works of art served many purposes for Alice Boner. On the one hand, it documented her interest in Indian art and art history. On the other, the objects inspired her artistically and appealed to her in a religious sense. The Indian miniature painting is an example of this symbiotic relationship: In a diary entry, she confessed that the subtle nature of miniature painting had taken possession of her. The desire to instill deeper meaning into her own images produced a wealth of detail in her own works: “[M]y canvasses are crowded to the brim, and since they take years in the making, each one would take hours of contemplation of a conscientious spectator.”³² Her encounters with Indian art, with architecture, sculpture, painting, dance, and music served as an “infusion of blood” for Alice.

Something new and alien had entered into her bloodstream: “It has changed my life altogether and has given me sustenance these last twenty or twenty-five years. It has become assimilated with my own life-blood and spirit. I can never detach myself from it again.”³³ Alice Boner acquired an in-depth knowledge of Indian art. It became an inseparable part of her creative endeavors, her work, and even her life $\text{₹}6$.

This inner connection with her collection explained why Alice Boner attached such great importance to its preservation and why she left nothing to chance in this effort. Against a backdrop of revised Indian legislation, she attempted, after the Second World War, to distribute her collection between India and Switzerland in such a way that it would be preserved and accessible in the most effective way possible. In so doing, she assessed the importance and potential of her collection in a quite realistic manner.³⁴

29 The Alice Boner Foundation for Fundamental Research in Indian Art had given significant financial support to the project: www.bhu.ac.in/kala/gallery_aliceboner.htm (last accessed 8.11.2021).

30 Museum Rietberg, Zürich, document archive, AB.06-21. Eberhard Fischer to O.P. Tandon, n.d.; AB.06-02. Eberhard Fischer to O.P. Tandon, June 23, 1988.

31 Fischer 1994, p. 176.

32 Boner, Soni, and Soni, 1993, p. 201, diary entry from July 2, 1956.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Alice Boner knew that there were more impressive and interesting works in the many Indian museums and collections and that her collection could only have a future outside of India. In a letter to Ambassador Lindt, she explained that “in the overwhelming mass of sculptures this country possesses [...], a collection like mine [would] not have much significance either. Whereas in Switzerland, it would remain a permanent monument to Indian art [...] and [would] be cherished and looked after”: Museum Rietberg, Zürich, document archive, AB.06-04, Alice Boner to A. R. Lindt, November 11, 1970.

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In retrospect, this assessment turned out to be correct. Since the first major exhibition *Alice Boner and the Art of India* in 1982, the name Alice Boner has been permanently associated with Museum Rietberg.³⁵ Her sculptures rank among the highlights of the Indian collection and attract considerable attention.³⁶ However, it is Alice Boner's collection of Indian miniatures that has arguably achieved the greatest long-term impact as well as international appreciation and attention.³⁷ These paintings were (and are) not only shown systematically in large and small special exhibitions, but are also regularly sent as sought-after loans to international museums.³⁸ As a further important fact, in addition to Alice Boner's art collection, almost the entire estate of her photos, letters, manuscripts, and diaries are held at the Museum.³⁹ The Alice Boner Archive at Museum Rietberg is now fully accessible to anyone who is interested.⁴⁰

We also must not forget the efforts of the ABI in Varanasi, which offers artists and academics from all over the world the opportunity to work with their archive and library. Alice Boner's plans worked out in the end: Her impressive collection and estate are permanently accessible to a wide public audience in India and in Switzerland §7.

³⁵ See the catalog for the exhibition *Boner and Fischer* 1982.

³⁶ The sculpture of Shiva as a naked ascetic (RVI 230), the Mithuna couple (RVI 256), the goddess Ambika (RVI 231), and the sculpture of Ganesha (RVI 258) are still among the museum's highlights: see, among others, Fischer 2002, Beltz 2002, and Beltz 2003a; the rest of her collection of sculptures is permanently accessible in the museum's open arts depot.

³⁷ See, for example, *Wunder einer goldenen Zeit / Wonders of a Golden Age* (1987) or *Pahari Meister / Pahari Masters* (1990). The complete collection of pictures was first published in 1994 by Georgette Boner, Eberhard Fischer, and B. N. Goswamy.

³⁸ Fischer 1994, p. 177.

³⁹ The museum received Alice Boner's large estate, i.e., photos and letters, from the Boner Foundation for Art and Culture in 2008.

⁴⁰ The exhibition *Alice Boner: A Visionary Artist and Scholar Across Two Continents*, which was shown in Mumbai, New Delhi, Varanasi, and Zurich between 2014 and 2015, was created as part of an archival review. see Beltz and Kurathi 2016.

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#1 Ingresi Raja ("English King") mask,
Sri Lanka, early 20th century, wood,
pigments. 80 x 40 cm. Museum Rietberg,
Zürich, RVI 2306SL, donation from Alice
Boner

Provenance: [. . .] October 31 - November 6,
1971, Alice Boner



22 Alice Boner. *Pflanzen im Haus, Benares* (*Plants in the House, Benares*) [a view of the inner courtyard of the house on Assi Ghat with a glimpse of the Devi sculpture, which is in the Alice Boner Institute]. watercolor on paper, 53.5 × 44 cm. Museum Rietberg, Zürich. AB.1592, donation from Alice Boner's heirs

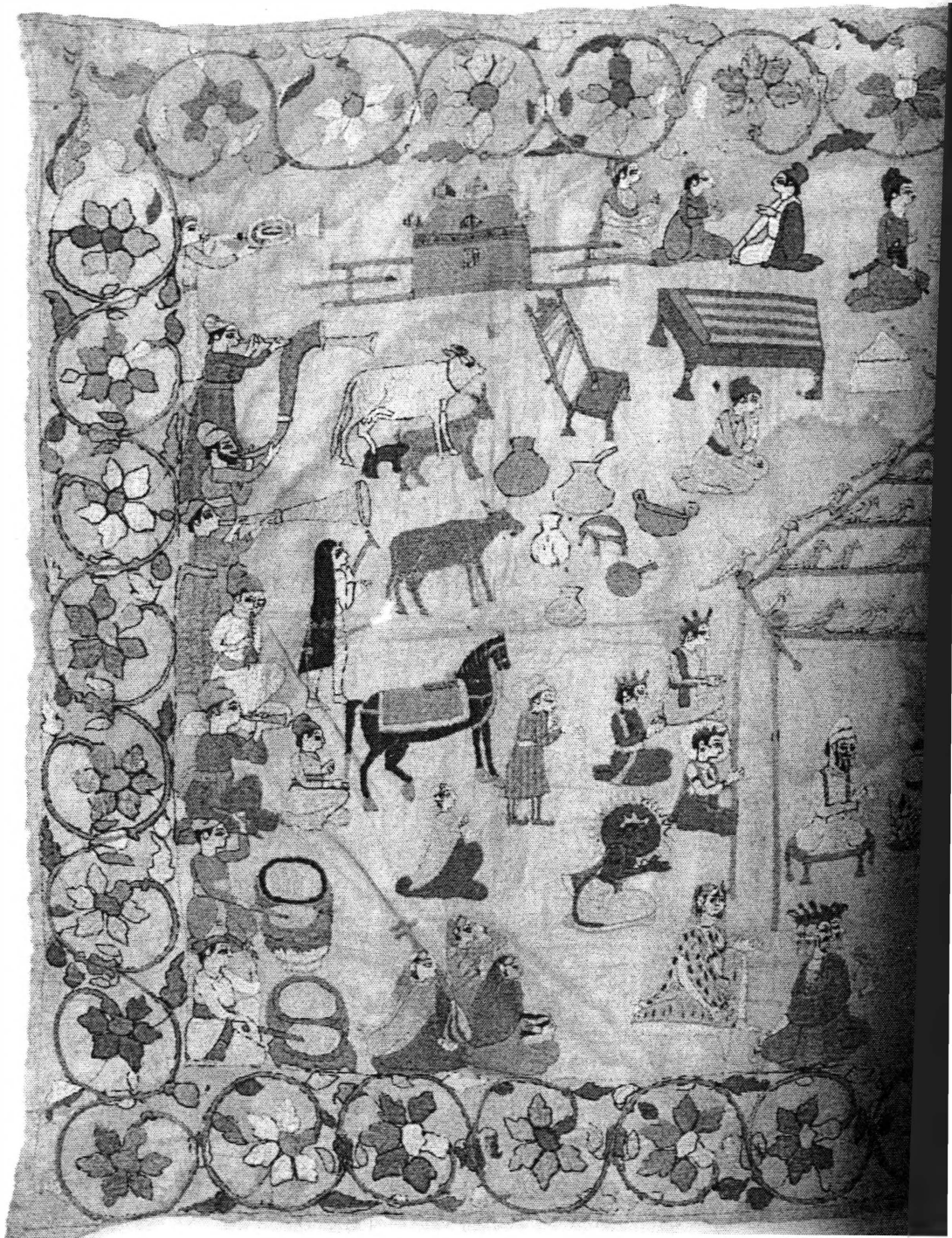


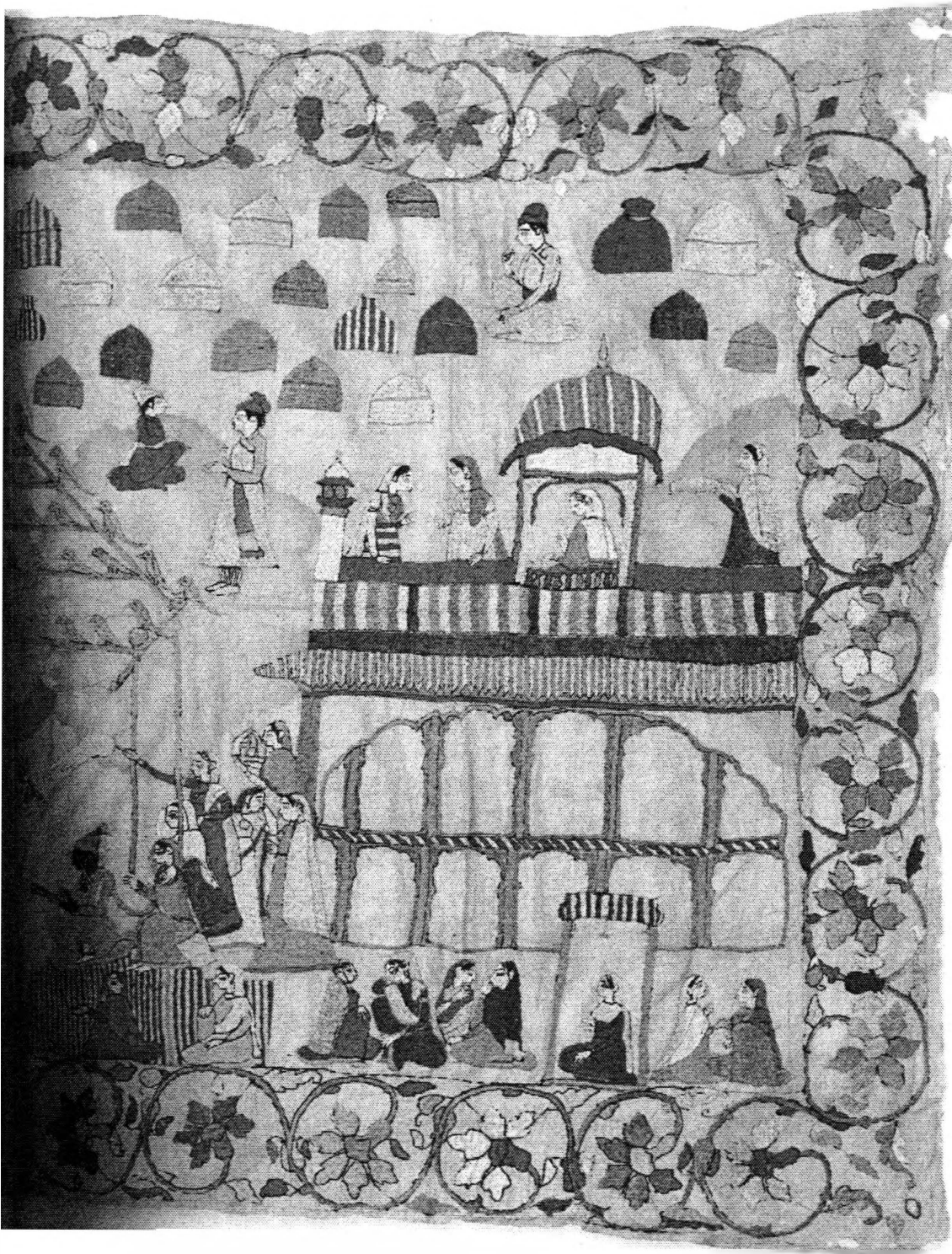
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23 *Chamba Rumal mit Krishnas Hochzeit / Chamba Rumal with Krishna's Wedding.* India, Himachal Pradesh, 18th/19th century, cotton, silk threads, 56 × 92 cm. Museum Rietberg, Zürich. RVI 643, donation from Georgette Boner

Provenance: [...], until 1981, Alice Boner Collection; 1981-1989, Georgette Boner





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#4 *Krishna und Radha auf dem Thron / Krishna and Radha on the Throne*, India, Pahari region, 1850–1875, pigment painting on paper, 24.5 × 19 cm, Museum Rietberg, Zürich, RVI 1706, donation from Georgette Boner

Provenance: [] until 1981, Alice Boner
Collection: 1981–1993, Georgette Boner

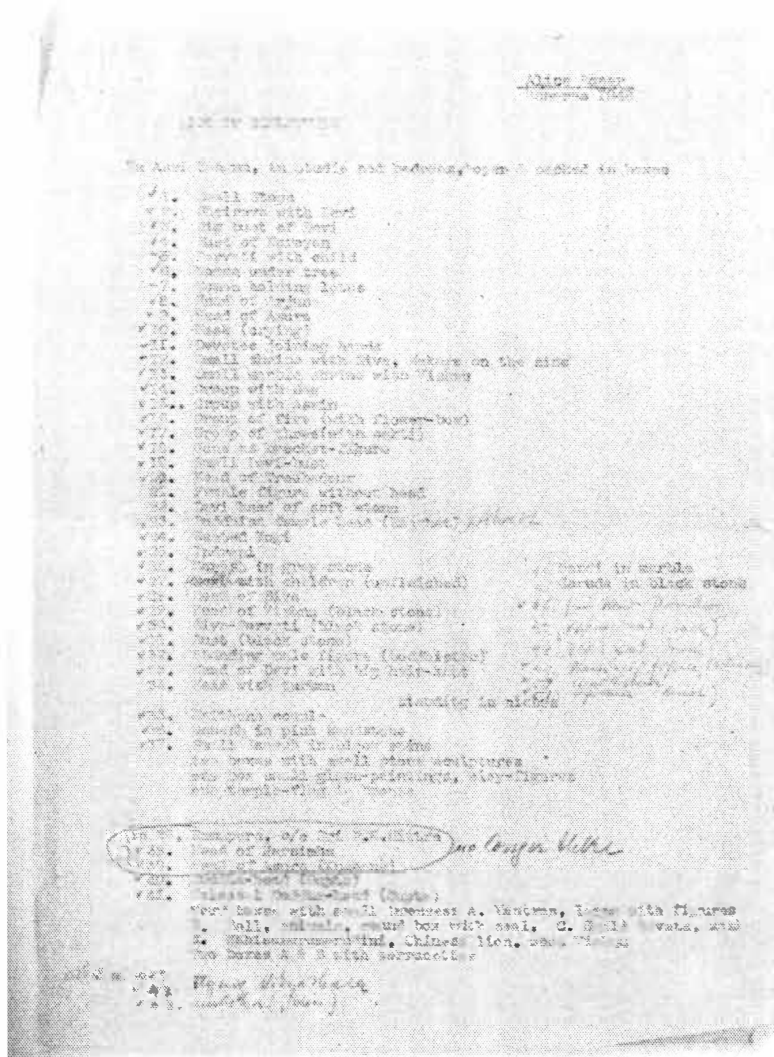


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#5 List of the figures in Alice Boner's house on Assi Ghat in Varanasi, dated 1948, Museum Rietberg, Zurich, document archive. AB.01-03

#6 Untitled [Alice Boner on the roof terrace of her house on Assi Ghat in Varanasi with a sculpture of a goddess]. 1977. Baryta paper, gelatin silver. 6.2x8.9cm, Museum Rietberg, Zurich. ABF 81-103, Alice Boner's legacy



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#7 Relief of Ganesha, India, Bundelkhand, Chandella dynasty, 11th century, sandstone, 43 x 51 x 13 cm. Museum Rietberg, Zurich, RVI 258, donation from Alice Boner

Provenance [...], until 1971. Alice Boner Collection

