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Title: "When Instruments Sing Again"

Published in: Pathways of art: how objects get to the museum.
Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess
Editor: Tisa Francini, Esther (Ed.)
Year: 2022
Pages: 423-431
ISBN: 978-3-03942-097-1

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When Instruments
Sing Again

Collaborative research
and exhibiting

In 2013, Museum Rietberg acquired a collection of 91 stringed instruments from India and Nepal from Bengt Fosshag. The passionate collector had bought them over a period of many years from art dealers and antiques stores, mainly in Germany, France, and Belgium, but had never traveled to Asia himself. An illustrator and graphic designer by profession, he was particularly interested in the sculptural and figurative form of these instruments, their human features, and their unusually intense expressiveness §1. Bengt Fosshag donated a part of his collection to the museum, which purchased another part with funds from the Rietberg Circle. Just one year after its acquisition, the museum displayed the new collection in the exhibition *Sculpted Sounds: Stringed Instruments from India*.¹ The team of curators, exhibition designers, graphic designers, and photographers skillfully staged the musical instruments originally perceived and used as everyday objects as “works of art”: They appeared in a new light and took on a new aura and meaning through their presentation at the museum §2. The objects thus experienced several changes in meaning: from artistic carvings to instruments played in India, to decorative merchandise for Western collectors, and from private collection items to museum items. All of these new interpretations are part of the objects’ biographies, which needed to be made visible in terms of their continuities, breaks, and dynamics.² Probably the most visually attractive and also most interesting group of objects were 44 carved instruments (known as banams) from the Santal community from today’s Bihar in India.

1 Beltz 2014, Beltz and Celio-Scheurer 2014.

2 See Beltz and Celio-Scheurer 2019.

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Fascinated by the beauty and expressiveness of these instruments, the then assistant curator, Marie-Eve Celio-Scheurer, initiated an international cooperation project with the Crafts Museum in New Delhi, which focused research on the meaning, use, and manufacture of the sculptural banams. Central and innovative to the project was that the source or community of origin, namely the Santals as the creators of these instruments, were involved in it §4.³ The exhibition *Cadence and Counterpoint: Documenting Santal Musical Traditions*, which took place in New Delhi in 2015, grew out of this cooperation §3.⁴

What made the further development of the exhibition in India lastingly significant was not only the fact that a small selection of the instruments from the Fosshag Collection traveled to India on loan, but also, above all, the venue. The exhibition was held in India's most important museum, the National Museum, which, until that point, had paid little attention to the art of India's indigenous people. Against the backdrop of ongoing debates about the exhibition practices of ethnographic museums (see politics of representation), this fact cannot be emphasized enough.⁵ The exhibition was all the more significant as the Crafts Museum in New Delhi was closed practically at the same time as a permanent and prominent exhibition space for this type of art. It should be highlighted here that collaborative research and cooperation have had a lasting impact. The freelance ethnologist Ravi K. Dwivedi, who had worked on the exhibition in New Delhi, organized, among other things, numerous workshops in which young Santals could learn the art of carving and making instruments §5.

As part of our museum collection, the instruments embody the problem of museum representational practice: they stand for the contradictory way museums deal with marginalized and threatened cultures and communities in the tension between exoticization, aestheticization, appropriation, othering, and exclusion.⁶ It should be pointed out once again that this type of art was rarely acquired by previous collectors and donors to Museum Rietberg, such as Eduard von der Heydt or Alice Boner, and the museum itself did not focus on this genre. When the museum was founded, it based its identity on a narrowly defined concept of art: It primarily collected and exhibited Indian art that was canonized as 'classical,' that is, Buddhist and Hindu temple sculptures and ritual objects as well as court painting from northern and southern India. The art of the marginalized sections of the population was not included. This should only change over time.⁷ After Museum Rietberg modified its collection policy in recent decades and has increasingly been acquiring "non-classical" art, the next step is to show the new acquisitions in the permanent exhibition.⁸

Until then, the instruments are being stored in the museum's display depot and urgently require an ongoing critical analysis of their

3 All those involved, such as Ravi Kant Dwivedi, Mushtak Khan, Maillika Leuzinger, Babudhan Murmu, Shubdhan Murmu, Sangeeta Murmu, Sonadhan Murmu, Yashodi Murmu, Kritika Narula, Joyoti Roy, Malini Saigal, and Venu Vasudevan, as well as sponsors such as the Accentus Foundation, Elena Probst Fonds, UNESCO, the Swiss Embassy in New Delhi, the Federal Office of Culture, the Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne, National and Crafts Museum in New Delhi should receive specific thanks at this point.

4 Beltz, Celio-Scheurer, and Ghose 2015 and Celio-Scheurer and Ghose 2015.

5 Sebastian 2015.

6 On the controversial term "tribal art," cf. Beltz 2012 and 2019.

7 See also the article by Eborhard Fischer in this volume, pp. 407–422.

8 See Beltz 2009 and 2019; see also Fischer, Jain, and Shah 2015.

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inherent culture, which is exposed to an increasingly globalized and, consequently, industrialized world. As works of art, they are witnesses to the rapid change in traditional cultures and, at the same time, proof of their vulnerability.⁹ They are looking to us to take responsibility and implement further collaborative projects of this kind.

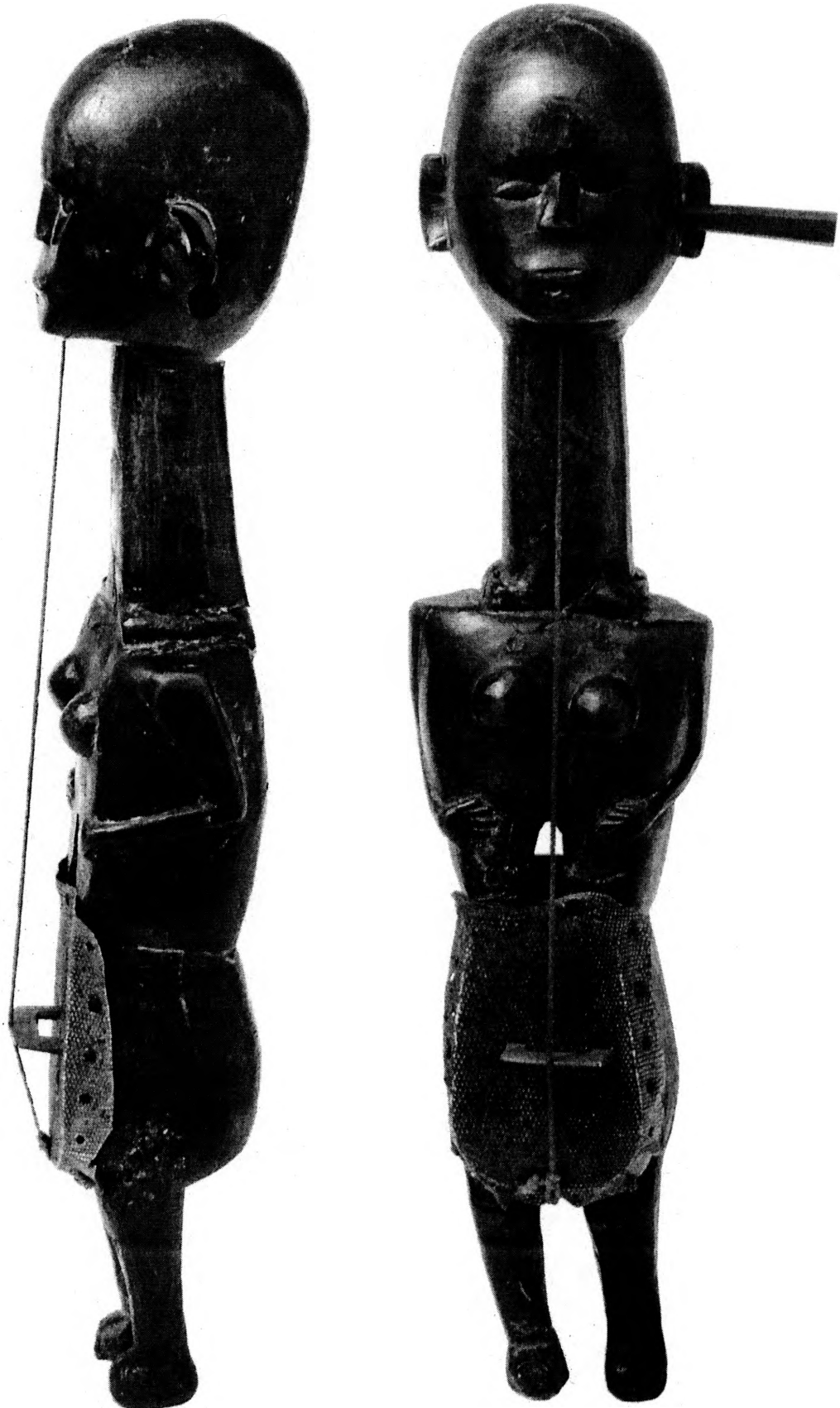
⁹ Beltz and Mallebrein 2012, and Beltz 2019.

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#1 Dhodro Banam, India, stringed instrument, wood, animal hide, 61.5 × 19.5 × 11 cm, Museum Rietberg, Zürich, 2014.9, purchased with funds from the Rietberg Circle

Provenance: [...]; until 1993, François Pannier, Paris; 1993–2013, Bengt Fosshag, Rüsselsheim



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22 The exhibition *Klang Körper: Saiteninstrumente aus Indien/Sculpted Sounds: Stringed Instruments from India*, Museum Rietberg, Zürich, September 5, 2014 until August 9, 2015, exhibition design by Martin Sollberger

23 The exhibition *Cadence and Counterpoint: Documenting Santal Musical Traditions*, National Museum New Delhi, April 15 until May 17, 2017, exhibition design by Kanu Agrawal, Deepak Das, Philippe Karre, and Philippe Girardin



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34 The team at work in the National Crafts Museum in New Delhi in December 2014. In the first row the Santal musicians Bhulu Murmu, Shibdhan Murmu, Sonadhan Murmu, and Babudhan Murmu; in the second row Mushtak Khan, Ravi Kant Dwivedi, Marie Eve Celso Scheurer, Ruchira Ghose, Kritika Narula, and Malhika Leuzinger

35 Group of young Santals with self-made instruments, Bihar 2019

