



DIALOGUES ON ALICE BONER

International Symposium

12 - 14 January, 2018
at Museum Rietberg, Zürich

by Alice Boner Institute, Varanasi, India and
Museum Rietberg, Zürich, Switzerland



ALICE BONER INSTITUTE

Boner Foundation for Art and Culture, Zürich

museum
rietberg



Symposium Schedule

DAY 1 | FRIDAY, 12th January 2018

Time	Session	Speakers
6.00 pm to 6.15 pm	Welcome Addresses	Dr. Albert Lutz, Director Rietberg Museum Dr. Johannes Beltz, Dy. Director, Museum Rietberg, Mr. Harsha Vinay, Director, Alice Boner Institute Prof. Tristan Weddigen, University of Zurich, President of Boner Foundation for Art and Culture
6.15 pm to 7.45 pm	Public Lecture & Film Screening (sequences)	Mr. Sadanand Menon, “ KALPANA ” by Uday Shankar
8.00 pm to 10.00 pm	Dinner (<i>for speakers only</i>)	Conference Dinner

DAY 2 | SATURDAY, 13th January 2018

Time	Title Of Paper	Speakers
9.00 -10.00 am	Mandalas of Method and Meaning: Has Formalism been a Globalising Force in Art History?	Prof. Naman P. Ahuja
Session 1	Alice Boner, Temple Architecture and Texts	Prof. Adam Hardy
	Geometric abstraction as a globalized method of artistic research	Prof. Tristan Weddigen
	DISCUSSION CHAIR	Dr. Johannes Beltz
10.20 - 11.00 am	COFFEE / TEA BREAK	
11.00 - 12.20 pm	A spurious palm-leaf manual for painters from Odisha, formerly in the collection of Alice Boner	Dr. Eberhard Fischer
Session 2	The Amar Singh Sūrsāgar in Banaras and Zürich	Prof. Jack Hawley
	Alice Boner's Collection of Indian Painting	Dr. Caroline Widmer
	Reinvention of an Indian style in the Modern Age: Painting, Dance and Y.G. Srimati	Dr. John Guy
12.20 - 1.00 pm	DISCUSSION CHAIR	Prof. Naman Ahuja
1.00 - 2.00 pm	LUNCH	
2.00 - 2.40 pm	Spirituality through Composition	Mr. Jeremy Gafas and Ms. Fleur Heiniger
Session 3	The idea of Vedanta, and Advaita in Indian art : With a special focus on Alice Boner Alain Daniélou and Swami Vivekananda's thoughts	Mr. Samit Das
	DISCUSSION CHAIR	Dr. Johannes Beltz/ Prof. Joerg Gengnagel
2.40 - 3.00 pm		

DAY 2 | SATURDAY, 13th January 2018

Time	Title Of Paper	Speakers
3.00 - 4.00 pm	<i>The Crack in the Mirror</i>	Prof. Saskia Kersenboom
Session 4	Understanding the Nataraja through its geometry?	Dr. Johannes Beltz
	From dance to Meditation?	Ms. Eva Dietrich
	DISCUSSION CHAIR	Mr. Sadanand Menon
4.20 - 4.40 pm	COFFEE / TEA BREAK	
4.40 - 5.40 pm	Alice Boner and Alain Daniélou in Varanasi	Ms. Patricia Obermeier
Session 5	Alice Boner Archives and its future	Ms. Andrea Kuratli
	Alice Boner's Varanasi	Prof. Joerg Gengnagel
	DISCUSSION CHAIR	Mr. Harsha Vinay
6.00 pm	Conclusion	Dr. Johannes Beltz and Mr. Harsha Vinay

DAY 3 | SUNDAY, 14th January 2018

Time	Session	Speakers
11.30 am	Public walk through the exhibition and galleries	Finissage Ms. Anjali Shah, Ms. Andrea Kuratli and Dr. Johannes Beltz (Exhibition, Smaragd)

Duration of Presentation: 20 mins per speaker

Duration of Discussion: 20 mins

Welcome Speeches: Museum Rietberg,
Park-Villa Rieter, Auditorium

For Tickets: [click here](#)

For more Information: rietberg.ch

LIST OF SPEAKERS

Name / City

Prof. Adam Hardy, **Wales**

Ms. Andrea Kuratli, **Zürich**

Dr. Caroline Widmer, **Zürich**

Dr. Eberhard Fischer, **Zürich**

Ms. Eva Dietrich, **Zürich**

Ms. Fleur Heiniger, **Geneva**

Mr. Harsha Vinay, **Varanasi**

Prof. Jack Hawley, **New York**

Mr. Jeremy Gafas, **Geneva**

Prof. Joerg Gengnagel, **Würzburg**

Dr. Johannes Beltz, **Zürich**

Dr. John Guy, **New York**

Prof. Naman Ahuja, **New Delhi**

Ms. Patricia Obermeier, **Munich**

Mr. Sadanand Menon, **Chennai**

Mr. Samit Das, **New Delhi**

Prof. Saskia Kersenboom, **Hungary**

Prof. Tristan Weddigen, **Zürich**





Picture: Alice Boner Institute, Varanasi, India | a residency space for academic and artistic research

ABSTRACTS OF PAPERS

1. Geometric abstraction as a globalized method of artistic research

Prof. Tristan Weddigen, University of Zürich

Global and transcultural art history sometimes adopts geometry and ornament as a universal language of art as to compare heterogeneous aesthetic phenomena. The paper discusses the scholarly work of Alice Boner. Starting from an interest in Indian dance, she analyzes Indian art, especially sculpture, on the basis of a geometrical grid. Based on the study of Boner's library, the paper explores how much her approach globalizes the wide-spread psychological geometric formalism of the turn of the century and how far she localizes it by adding metaphysical and temporal values rooted in Hindu scriptures. Overall, the paper intends to retrace geometric abstraction as a globalized method of artistic research.



2. A spurious palm-leaf manual for painters from Odisha, formerly in the collection of Alice Boner

Padma Shri Dr. Eberhard Fischer, Former Director, Museum Rietberg, Zürich

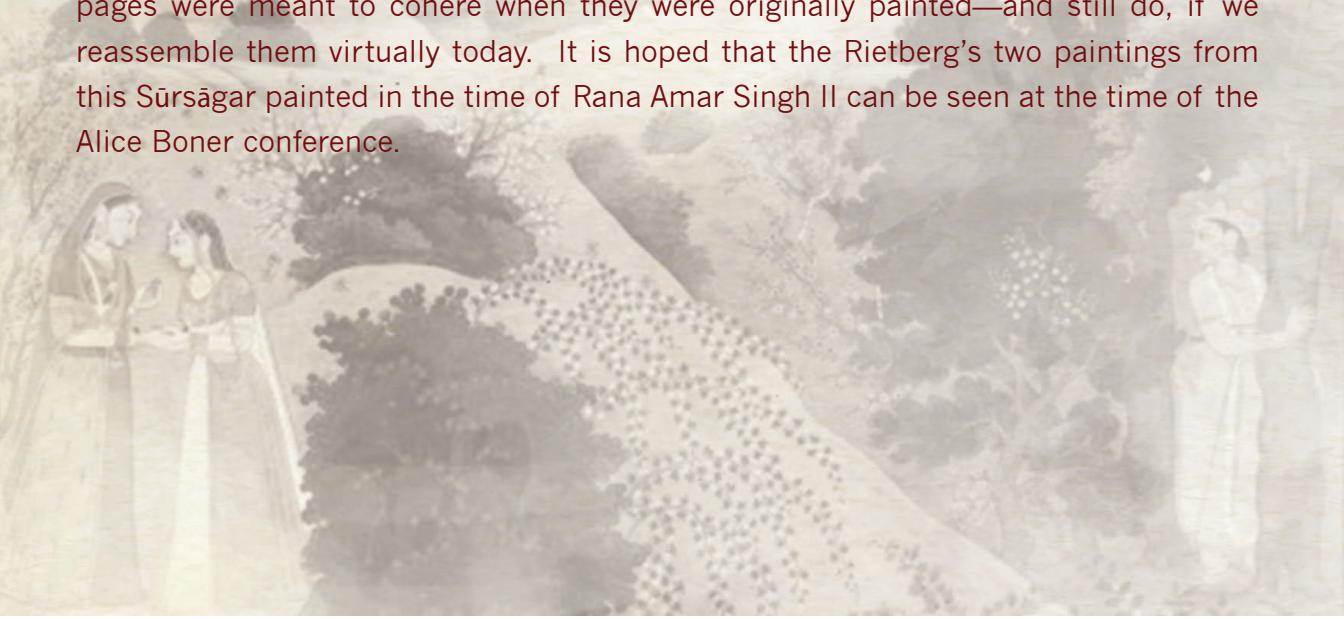
In the 1960s, the Puri based and internationally known Pandit SadasivaRath Sharma presented Alice Boner with an illustrated palm-leaf manuscript titled “*chitrashastra*”, painting treatise. It consists of 19 folios, inscribed on both sides with Sanskrit slokas(verses) and Odia captions to a large number of incised drawings and diagrams. The pothi (manuscript) also contains a four-line colophon that speaks of a Rupakara(wood-sculptor’s caste) master from Puri as the author and also gives a date that leaves much space for interpretation. The light brown folios have the look of antiqueness, of having been prepared decades ago, if not centuries.

No similar text exists in Odia language and only few comparable works are known, all famous and often quoted among art-historians. In 1999, my friend Dinanath Pathy showed me the manuscript, I photographed the folios and we decided to publish it. In the process of editing the fascinating opus, which provides us with most interesting terms in Sanskrit as well as in the specific Odia workshop lingo of “traditional” crafts-persons of Puri, we were again and again puzzled by obscure details. But only after we had properly transliterated and translated all inscriptions, when we translated and discussed between us the colophon, we questioned more and more the authenticity of the manuscript. Slowly, the pure editing work changed to become a criminalistic affair. And we asked ourselves: When this manuscript was “spurious”, what are the consequences for the work of Alice Boner done in collaboration with Pandit SadasivaRath Sharma, who, we were now certain, had produced this palm-leaf manuscript? We time and again felt obliged to give up the editing project. But in the summer 2016, the last weeks that Dinanath Pathy and I enjoyed working together, we decided to finalise our essay for publication. Unfortunately, my friend passed away August last year and I have to present now alone our findings.

3. The Amar Singh Sūrsāgar in Banaras and Zürich

Prof. Jack Hawley, Columbia University

One of Alice Boner's most significant contributions to intercultural understanding between India and the West was her decision to live and work in Banaras, yet without abandoning her European sensibilities and involvements as she did so. Two institutions with which she is closely associated symbolize this particularly: Bharat Kala Bhavan in Banaras and the Rietberg Museum in Zurich. As it happens, both museums possess two pages from a dispersed Sūrsāgar painted in the Mewar court at the turn of the eighteenth century. Most known pages from this Sūrsāgar—but by no means all—are now to be found in the West, one in the hands of a German collector with deep Indian involvements, one in the hands of a collector of Indian origin now living close to Zurich. This web of international and intercultural associations provides an occasion to celebrate Alice Boner's legacy by exploring the way in which these pages were meant to cohere when they were originally painted—and still do, if we reassemble them virtually today. It is hoped that the Rietberg's two paintings from this Sūrsāgar painted in the time of Rana Amar Singh II can be seen at the time of the Alice Boner conference.



4. Alice Boner and Alain Daniélou in Varanasi

Patricia J. Obermeier, University of Munich

This paper focuses on a special Ex-Pat-Friendship, shared by two outstanding, artistic souls, who happened to cross path in Varanasi, also called Kashi- the City of Light: Alice Boner, the Swiss painter, sculptor, art historian and Indologist and Alain Daniélou, historian, artist, intellectual, Musicologist and Indologist.

Their love for the city and their passion for Indian Arts & Culture formed a life long bond. But especially the fact of being neighbours on Assi ghat between 1936-1951 connected them in a very particular way and provided ground for charming stories of everyday life on the one side and artistic and intellectual exchange on a very high level on the other. Both mentioned each other in their memoirs and diaries, which testify more than a random encounter- a friendship with deep and spiritual exchange of thought.

While Alain Daniélou fully immersed himself into being a Hindu- through his looks as well as his speech, Alice Boner kept her cultural identity rather intact at all times. Looking at their shared period of time in Varanasi and exploring their encounters throughout India, we gain insight into the European Artists`Research, Exchange and Expat Community in the cultural and intellectual hub of Benares at that time, which still exists vibrantly until today.

Alice Boner and Alain Daniélou are interesting examples of how cultural identity can be observed historically and influence the artistic and biographical process of a life, lived between 2 cultures. Or in better words: A life lived, in order to transcend borders by the means of creativity.

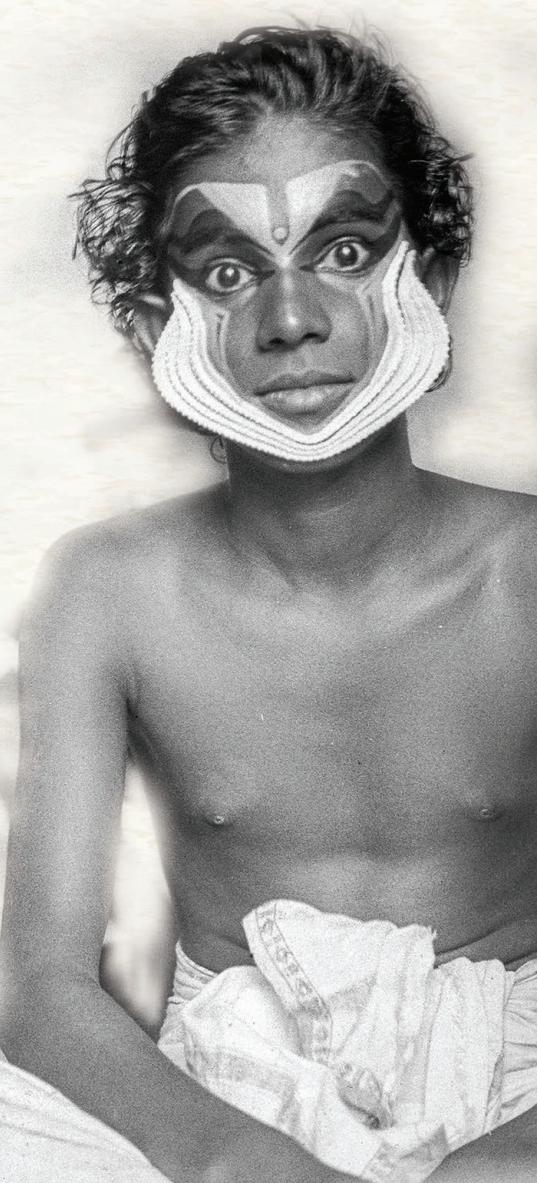
5. The Crack in the Mirror...

Dr. Saskia Kersenboom, Paramparai Foundation

This paper addresses the transformation of lyrical dance in South India, taking the heritage of devadasis as its central point of reference. It diagnosis three major ruptures: in less than a century they changed the practice of song and dance from paid labour in temples and courts into luxury of leisure at home, and finally pushed luxury to a limit that questions the very relevance of these artistic practices.

The first rupture was of legal nature. In 1947 the Devadasi Act forbade the dedication of women to temples and thereby their function within Hindu temple ritual. This resulted in the disempowerment of an entire professional group of female dancers, dance masters and their accompanying musicians.

The second rupture is of symbolic nature. It marks the rapid appropriation of symbolic capital by a socially strong stratum of society from a hereditary community that had been stigmatised and weakened beyond self-defence. Appropriation involved redefinition of the name, form, function and interpretation of dance to suit "Hindu Renaissance" and Indian Nationalism. The third rupture is liminal: it juxtaposes form for the sake of form, to form for the sake of survival and validation.



6. Understanding the Nataraja through its geometry? Revisiting Alice Boner's compositional analysis of a museum master piece

Dr. Johannes Beltz, Curator and Deputy Director, Museum Rietberg, Zürich

The Dancing Shiva (Nataraja) is today one of the most popular icons of a modern universal Hinduism. His image illustrates books, websites, he also figures on t-shirts or shopping bags. This popularity is a result of a modern appropriation, which began in the late 19th century and which was related to the rise of Orientalism. It has been argued that this process of reshaping our understanding of the Nataraja was the result of a creative and intense debate, which happened among scholars, intellectuals, travelers and artists, across India and the West. Among many others, Alice Boner was part of this new interpretation.

In my talk I focus on Alice Boner's article "Zur Komposition des Shiva Nataraja im Museum Rietberg", published in 1964 in the leading journal *Artibus Asiae*. Taking a fresh and critical look I'll explore the history of the icon and relate it to Alice Boner's proposed interpretation. Are the compositional patterns superimposed or genuinely inherent? Finally the paper adopts a new approach towards a dynamic understanding of this important art work.

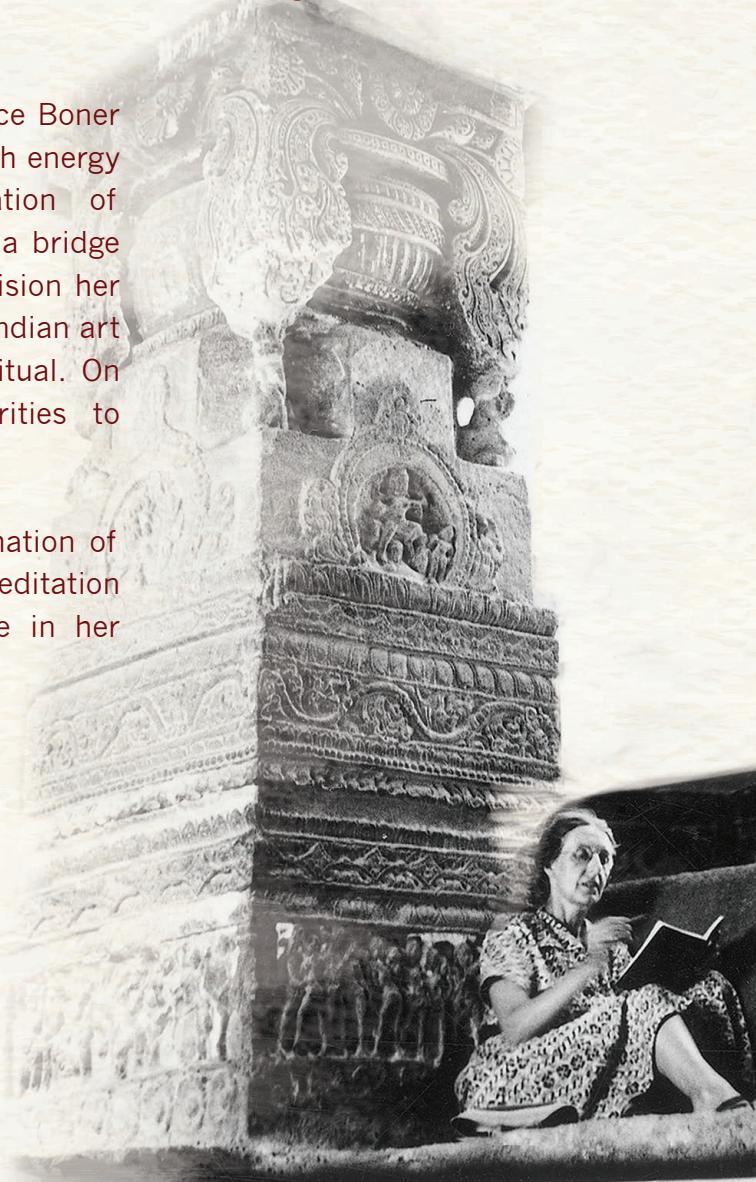


7. From Dance to Meditation?

Eva Dietrich, Researcher and Tour Guide, Museum Rietberg, Zürich

Hidden behind Indian sculptures Alice Boner discovered geometrical diagrams with energy lines. They were the manifestation of "universal processes" and acted as a bridge to the divine. Although found in a vision her theory follows the interpretation of Indian art as being something essentially spiritual. On the other hand, it shows similarities to tendencies of modern art in Europa.

My contribution asks if a transformation of European dance concepts into meditation concepts might have played a role in her discovery and theory.

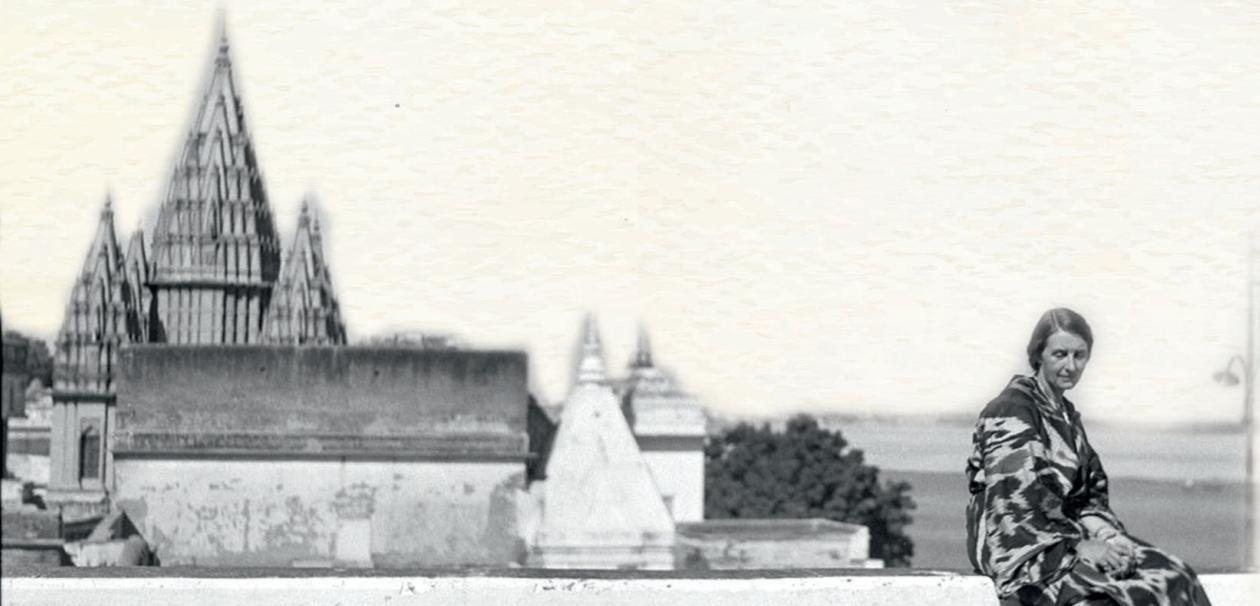


8. Alice Boner's Varanasi

Prof. Jörg Gengnagel, Würzburg University

In this talk I propose to literally situate and locate Alice Boner within Varanasi. I will do that by looking at the presence and visibility of Varanasi and more precisely of the area around AsiGhat where Alice Boner lived and the Alice Boner Institute is located until today. To what extant has Alice Boner's life and work been influenced by the very place where the Alice Boner Institute is located?

How does her search for universal,translocal principles in Indian art link to her life in Varanasi? What are the traces that can be found in her paintings, photos and writings of this specific local setting, the everyday life and pilgrimage practices around AsiGhat? I propose to link those observations to visualizations of space and spatial practices found in 18th and 19th century pilgrimage maps of Varanasi.

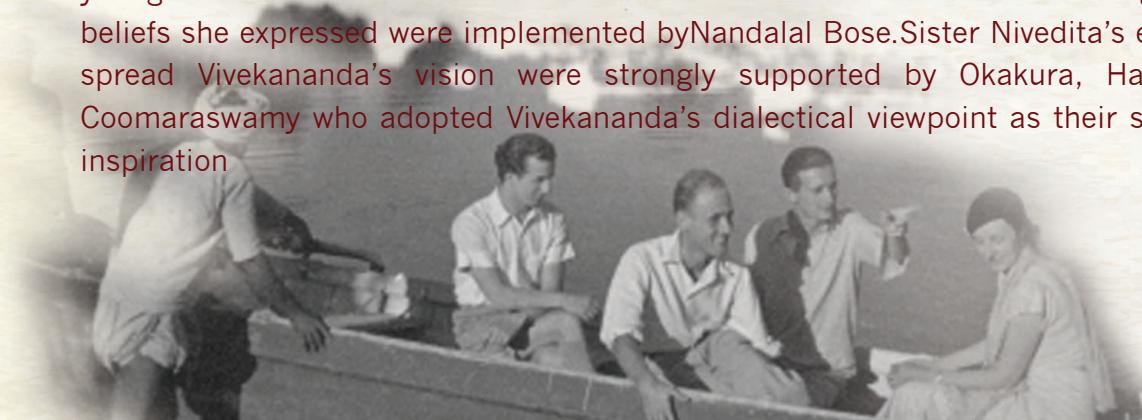


9. The idea of Vedanta, and Advaita in Indian art: With a special focus on Alice Boner, Alain Danielou and Swami Vivekananda's thoughts.

Mr. Samit Das, Artist and Art Historian

Although Vivekananda seems only to have had an indirect influence on Indian art this in no way detracts from the extraordinary impact of his thoughts and writings. Few documents are available on this subject and as we know, he never directly contributed to training any artists. We can nonetheless firmly state that he was one of the most influential sages of that time who inspired many reforms in Indian art and new formulations of the role of art. At this time, in the 1880s, Vivekananda raised the idea of the endurance of Indian culture recognizing the essential link between religion and culture. In his discourses spoke not only of religion, but also of India's ancient art and sciences which he knew first-hand from his extensive travels in the country and abroad. In his correspondence with Sister Nivedita he exhorts her to visit rural India and to observe the traditional art and craft works created by artists, making no distinction between artists and artisans as he viewed the country as a homogenous entity.

Most of his discourses were delivered during personal discussions and in letters to his friends and disciples. Sister Nivedita reproduced his words sharing his thoughts with young artists involved in the art movement of that time. A lot of the thoughts and beliefs she expressed were implemented by Nandalal Bose. Sister Nivedita's efforts to spread Vivekananda's vision were strongly supported by Okakura, Havell and Coomaraswamy who adopted Vivekananda's dialectical viewpoint as their source of inspiration

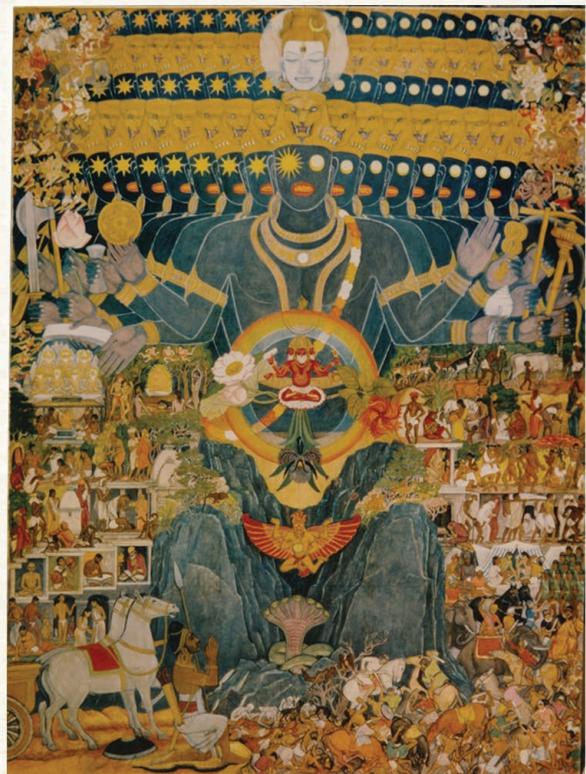


10. "Spirituality through composition : a study of Alice Boner's artwork evolution"

Mr.Jeremy Gafas and Ms. Fleur Heiniger, Students, University of Geneva

Although Alice Boner is mainly known for her research in Indian temple sculpture, her status as ambassador, and her photographic archive, she is also one of the rare female Western artists to have worked and lived in India from the 1930s to the 1970s. Indian culture has thus been at the centre of her research. Alice Boner's vast but uneven artistic legacy bears witness to her lifelong theoretical struggles, where a spiritual dimension progressively superseded her esthetical purposes.

Her practice went from sharp observation to internal feelings, from corporal movement to the dynamic of the cosmos, from the particular to the universal, and from scenes of daily life to allegory to icon. Of particular interest is the fashion in which Boner's representation of artistic *topos* evolved, signs of important shifts in her thought process. Alice Boner is therefore an outstanding example of the reciprocal influences of beliefs and artistic production.

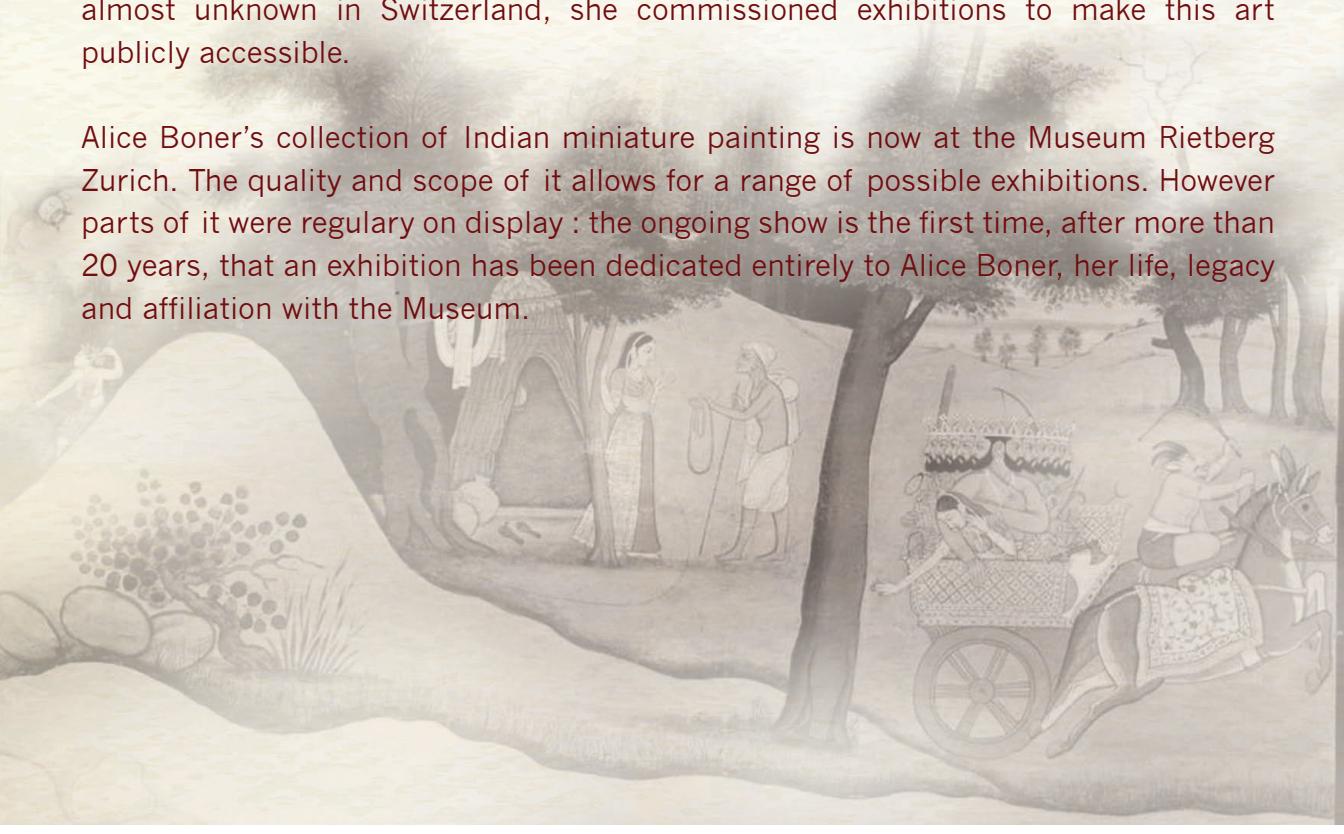


11. Alice Boner's Collection of Indian Painting

Dr. Caroline Widmer, Curator of Indian Painting, Museum Rietberg, Zürich

After her settling in India in 1939, Alice Boner started soon to collect Indian miniature paintings. Her collection grew fast into an impressive convolut. But Alice Boner 's mind was not primarily like that of a hunting collector. Themes and motives of the paintings she owned are of a wide range but reflect the artist's interests in many ways. She studied and worked with her treasures intensively, aiming at a deeper understanding for Indian art, culture and religion. At a time when collecting Indian paintings was almost unknown in Switzerland, she commissioned exhibitions to make this art publicly accessible.

Alice Boner's collection of Indian miniature painting is now at the Museum Rietberg Zurich. The quality and scope of it allows for a range of possible exhibitions. However parts of it were regulary on display : the ongoing show is the first time, after more than 20 years, that an exhibition has been dedicated entirely to Alice Boner, her life, legacy and affiliation with the Museum.



12. Alice Boner Archives and its future

Ms. Andrea Kuratli, Photo Archivist, Zürich

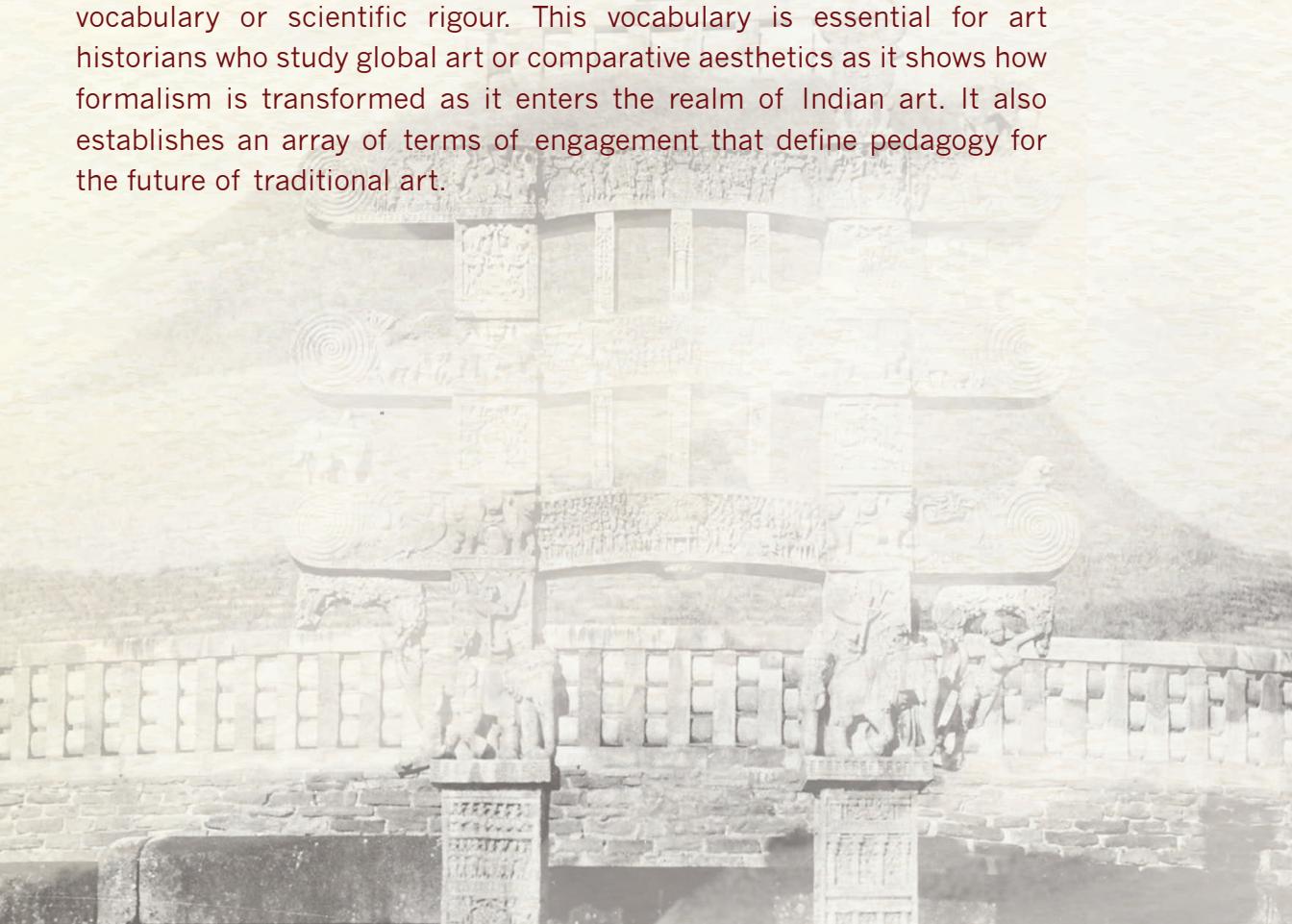
The current exhibition “Alice Boner in India - a Life for Art “is only one example of how the Alice Boner Archives can be used. In order to give ideas for the future use of the archives the presentation will give a more detailed insight in the structure and the content of the archives at the Museum Rietberg. In the presented user manual further connections and related content in other institutions are identified. This information in combination with an extended bibliography shall help to provide an easy access to Alice Boner’s estate for interested scholars.



13. Mandalas of Method and Meaning: Has Formalism been a Globalising Force in Art History?

Prof. Naman P. Ahuja, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Contrary to what is regarded as orientalist engagement, by seeking out a language of Indian formalism Boner was amongst those scholars who dispels the stereotype of a mystic east that was without technical vocabulary or scientific rigour. This vocabulary is essential for art historians who study global art or comparative aesthetics as it shows how formalism is transformed as it enters the realm of Indian art. It also establishes an array of terms of engagement that define pedagogy for the future of traditional art.



“Dialogues on Alice Boner” was first organized by the Alice Boner Institute and the National Museum, New Delhi in September 2016. The symposium in Zürich is inscribed in the same multidisciplinary perspective: It critically explores Alice Boner’s relevance today.

The seminar is supported by the [Alice Boner Institute](#), Varanasi, the Boner Foundation for Art and Culture, Zürich, and the Alice Boner Freundeskreis, Zürich, Museum Rietberg, Zürich. The seminar takes place within the framework of the festivities for “70 Years of Swiss-Indian Friendship”.

Images Courtesy; Alice Boner Archives, Museum Rietberg, Zürich



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