

NAGA

A FORGOTTEN MOUNTAIN REGION REDISCOVERED 22.08.08—17.05.09

(→Museum der Kulturen. Basel.)

Until a few years ago, the territory of the Naga people in the border area of North-east India and Myanmar (Burma) appeared as a blank spot on Western world maps. Today, after having been sealed off for many years, travellers are allowed back into the area which became the federal state Nagaland in 1963. Against this background the Museum der Kulturen now sheds light on the aesthetically exceptional cultural heritage of this people in a special exhibition. For the first time select pieces from Naga collections that were assembled over the last 120 years by the museums in Berlin, Munich and Basel are being shown to the public.

The Naga people, who number approximately 30 different ethnic groups, live in a mountainous region on the border between Northeast India and Myanmar (Burma). Once, they used to be feared as fierce warriors, even resisting British colonial rule tenaciously for a long time. Not only anthropologists and travellers but also colonial administrators were fascinated by this proud and status-conscious culture with its elaborate feasts of merit and its practice of head-hunting.

FASCINATING AESTHETICS

Their spectacular ritual life, a complex social organisation and the artistic and aesthetic appeal of Naga material culture soon attracted the attention of European anthropologists and collectors who, in the course of the years to come, were commissioned by various European museums to travel to India and acquire extensive collections on Naga material culture.

CULTURE IN A FORBIDDEN ZONE

And then, suddenly, contact to the Naga broke off. What had happened? Immediately after India gained independence in 1947 Naga territory was closed and declared a military zone. The Naga remained sealed off from the rest of the world for more than fifty years and foreign visitors were not allowed to travel to the area. This did not change even when Nagaland became an official Indian federal state in 1963.

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

It was only in the year 2000 that the Indian part of Naga territory was reopened to visitors. However, long years of British colonial rule, Christian proselytization by American Baptist missionaries and forced incorporation into the Indian state have left clear marks on the Naga people: the political situation in Nagaland remains highly volatile, and pervasive cultural change – today more than 90 percent of the Naga population are confessed Christians – has forced the approximately two million Naga living in the federal states of Northeast India and their roughly 100,000 kinsmen in Burma to seek and adopt a new, modern form of cultural identity.



NEWLY DISCOVERED COLLECTIONS

Against this background the Museum der Kulturen is putting on an exhibition that provides the opportunity to rediscover the cultural heritage of the Naga people. The show presents collections from the Ethnologische Museum in Berlin, the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich and the Museum der Kulturen Basel, which were assembled between the late 1870s and the early 1990s and have never been on display before.

HISTORY OF THE COLLECTIONS

The Berlin collection dates back to Adolf Bastian (1826–1905), the founding father of German anthropology, who was one of the first to conduct research among the Naga in 1878/79, in what was then known as the Assam District. The Munich collections goes back to the year 1911 when the German anthropologist Lucian Scherman (1864–1946) visited various Naga tribes on the Burmese side of the border. The collection is exceptional because of its special regional focus. The Basel collections are more recent but cover a longer time span: in 1936/37 the Basel museum commissioned the German anthropologist Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann (1899–1986) to put together a collection of ethnographic objects from the Naga-Hills District in Assam. Shortly later, in 1939, the museum purchased a small collection from the Basel anthropologist Paul Wirz (1822–1955) who had travelled in the Naga territory the year before. Finally, in 1989, the Museum der Kulturen acquired a unique Naga collection owned by the Czech-Indian anthropologist Milada Ganguli (1913–2000). Being an Indian citizen she had the exceptional privilege to travel to the Naga territory several times between 1963 and 1992, during a period when the area was officially strictly closed to visitors. Hers is therefore the only representative collection of Naga objects from the roughly 50-year period following Indian independence (1947).

RELICS FOR THE FUTURE

The collections shown in the Museum der Kulturen under the title «Naga – A Forgotten Mountain Region Rediscovered» bear testimony to a bygone era, making them one of the few remaining sources on the traditional culture of the Naga people. This means that the collections held in Western museums have become important cultural archives which not only help to explain the present situation in Nagaland, but also serve as an invaluable resource for the Naga people to analyze and understand their own history.

ART INTERVENTION AND SUPPORTING PROGRAMME

The exhibition also hosts works by the Zurich-based artist Cristina Fessler from her work cycle «Nagaland-Transfer 1992–2008». Her artworks enter into an exciting dialogue with the Naga pieces on show. – The exhibition is complemented by a rich supporting programme including guided tours, workshops, lectures, exhibition talks and special offers for schools.

To download the media release and press photos please click on www.mkb.ch/naga



Further information

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Opening times

22.08.08–17.05.09
Tuesday-Sunday: 10:00–17:00 h
Closed: 24./25. + 31.12.08–01.01.09 +
03./04/03.09
Entrance: CHF 7.— / 5.—

Exhibition catalogue

Richard Kunz, Vibha Joshi (Hg.) / Naga –
A Forgotten Mountain Region Rediscovered /
Christoph Merian Verlag, Museum der Kulturen,
Basel / August 2008 / 200 pages, 350 colour
plates, paperbound / CHF 44.—, € 28.—

Shop window

The boutique «Daniela Spillmann – Couture-à-
porter» (Rheinsprung 1, 4051 Basel) is showing
textiles from Nagaland in its display window
from 18.08.–15.09.08 and again from 05.01.–
19.01.09. – The shop in the Museum der
Kulturen offers an exclusive selection of
Naga products and handicrafts.

Dine like in Nagaland

During the whole period of the exhibition the
Restaurant «Mandir» (Spalenvorstadt 9, 4051
Basel) is offering culinary specialities from
the Indian state of Nagaland.

Naga Exhibition in Zürich

The Ethnographic Museum of the University of
Zurich is showing a complementary exhibition
under the title «Naga – Schmuck und Asche»
from 7 June 2008 to 1 March 2009.
www.musethno.unizh.ch

NEW ENTRANCE TO THE MUSEUM

From 22 August 2008 on, the new entrance to the Museum der Kulturen is located at Augustinergasse 8. During museum extension work (2008–2010) the entrance at Münsterplatz 20 will remain closed.

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