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Being Jain – Art and Culture of an Indian Religion

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Hardly any religion formulates ethical values more rigorously than Jainism. Until today, absolute non-violence, renunciation of possessions and universal tolerance are the guiding principles of this religion originating in India. The exhibition "Being Jain – Art and Culture of an Indian Religion" provides insights into the teachings, rituals and practice of Jainism through selected works of art and invites visitors to engage with the topic of sustainability. Interviews, films and "And you? The Game of Questions" are intended to encourage visitors to change perspectives and dare to explore new paths.

The exhibition "Being Jain – Art and Culture of an Indian Religion" provides an introduction to a religion which currently has about five million followers worldwide. Outside India, Jainism is largely unknown; unlike Buddhism, which emerged around the same time, it was never embraced by Western followers. In six chapters, the exhibition presents the fundamental beliefs of Jainism, its influence on daily life and religious practice, and features works of art created to illustrate and promote those beliefs. Visitors are encouraged to engage with the essential principles of Jainism, such as non-violence towards all living beings, sustainability and tolerance of other opinions and ways of life. This is the first exhibition in Switzerland on the subject of Jainism in nearly 50 years.

The exhibition is based on the latest findings in the history of art and religion; at the same time, it presents results from field research and interviews with practicing Jains from all over the world. It bridges history and the present by talking about migration, the Jain diaspora, but also about important issues such as ecology and non-violence. About 200 masterpieces of Jain art will be on display; from sculptures, ritual objects, large-scale textile paintings, precious illustrated manuscripts, and sacred texts to utilitarian objects used by monks. The artworks come mostly from the collection of the Museum Rietberg but also from important Indian museums and private collections. The oldest artworks were created almost 2000 years ago, the most recent ones are from the 20th century. The exhibition in the "Smaragd" is complemented in the Park-Villa Rieter by "Being the Jina: The Kalpasutra". Here, the legends of Jina Mahavira and Jain saints are retold through pictures, stories and an animated film.

In addition to the artworks, the five short films shown in two locations in the exhibition will captivate the visitor. They deal with the ritual practices of the Jains, the production of manuscripts and their use, temples, pilgrimages and the everyday life of Jain ascetics in India. Portraits and interviews allow insights into very personal life stories.

Important lenders to the exhibition are the National Museum in New Delhi, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) in Mumbai, the Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art in Hyderabad, the Museum of Art and Photography (MAP) in Bangalore, the Manjusha Museum in Dharmasthala and the State Museum in Lucknow. In addition, there are important paintings from the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne.

«And you? The Game of Questions»

The exhibition wants to do more than just look at the way of life and attitude of Jains. It addresses the audience and asks how they face the challenges of our time. Do Jain concepts such as tolerance and non-violence offer answers to our questions? A separate area in the exhibition gives the opportunity to approach these questions in a playful way. «And You? The Game of Questions» is based on the game «Snakes and Ladders», which originated in India and also plays a role in Jainism as a teaching tool. The large-scale game in the exhibition combines analogue game elements with a web-based app that allows visitors to ask their own questions.

Publications Accompanying the Exhibition

In conjunction with the exhibition Hatje Cantz releases a volume that takes on the themes of the exhibition and provides an introduction into essential concepts of Jainism as expressed in selected works of art. Large-scale photographs give insights into the contemporary religious practice of this religion in India. Six interviews with Jains from North America, India and Switzerland complement the volume and shed light on the different realities of life of Jains all over the world. “And you? The Game of Questions” is included in the book and invites the reader to continue playing the game beyond the museum.

In addition, Reclam publishes an introduction into Jainism authored by Patrick Felix Krüger. Thus, for the first time after many years a German-language introduction into the doctrines of this religion, its development, and philosophy is available again for a wider audience.

Besides these two printed volumes, a number of short films and interviews with Jains from North America, India, and Europe will be made available on the museum homepage.

Events

The exhibition is accompanied by public tours offered jointly with members of Jain communities. A series of discussions in the exhibition explores the question of how Jains deal with global challenges such as climate change, wars and growing social inequality. By asking "What does this have to do with me?" the exhibition addresses the visitors directly. Selected guests discuss non-violence, possessions and renunciation, sustainability and vegetarianism in the exhibition (for dates and topics, see the website or the bimonthly program).

Cooperations

The exhibition and the accompanying publication are a cooperative project with the Center for Religious Studies (CERES) at the Ruhr University Bochum and were created in close collaboration with Loyola Marymount University (LMU), Los Angeles, as well as the Arihanta Academy, Los Angeles, and FableVision Studios, Kellian Adams Pletcher, Boston, USA.

Students of art history and religious studies from the USA and Switzerland were involved in the concept of the exhibition with a video project.

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Authors and Curatorial Team

Dr. Johannes Beltz, exhibition director and curator

is deputy director and senior curator for Indian and Southeast Asian art at Museum Rietberg in Zurich. He curated numerous exhibitions, such as "Next Stop Nirvana – Approaches to Buddhism" (2018) or "Javanese Shadow Theatre – Stories about Life and the World" (2020). He regularly teaches at the University of Zurich and at the University of Teacher Education in Zurich.

Dr. Patrick Felix Krüger, curator and academic director

is a research associate at the Center for the Study of Religions (CERES), Research Section for Jainism, Ruhr University Bochum. He is currently leading a research project on "Jainism in the West. Jain communities in Europe between internal self-affirmation and strategic self-representation," fundamental findings of which were incorporated into the exhibition.

Harsha Vinay, curator and project manager in India

heads "Green Barbet," a company that provides consulting and outreach services to international museums and cultural organizations. He has collaborated on several international exhibitions, such as "Alice from Switzerland – a visionary artist and scientist between two continents" (India and Zurich 2016-19) and "Mirrors – The Reflected Self" (Zurich 2019). As former director of the Alice Boner Institute (ABI), he now actively supports this cultural institution in Varanasi, India.

Marion Frenger, curator, editor and translator

studied Oriental Art History, Indology and History at the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Bonn. Her work focuses on the art of South and Southeast Asia. In addition to teaching assignments in Bonn and at the Free University Berlin, she worked for various museums and private collections of Asian art. She publishes on topics of ancient and contemporary art of South and Southeast Asia and works as a freelance art historian, editor and translator.

Michaela Blaser, exhibition assistant, project manager "And You? The Game of Questions"

supports the development of the game that is part of the exhibition. Already during her studies of Art and Design Education at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland in Basel, she taught as an art educator in different assistant positions. Within the framework of "Art Lab", a peer-to-peer art education program at the Fondation Beyeler, she

developed and tested new art education formats. Most recently, she worked as an art educator and research assistant at the Cartoonmuseum Basel.

rietberg.ch/jain_en

Media contacts

Elena DelCarlo

Head of Marketing & Communications

Tel. +41 44 415 31 27

elena.delcarlo@zuerich.ch

Alain Suter

Communications und Cooperations

Tel. +41 44 415 31 34

alain.suter@zuerich.ch

Media texts and images for editorial purposes: rietberg.ch/press