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Alice Boner:

A Visionary Artist and Scholar

Across Two Continents

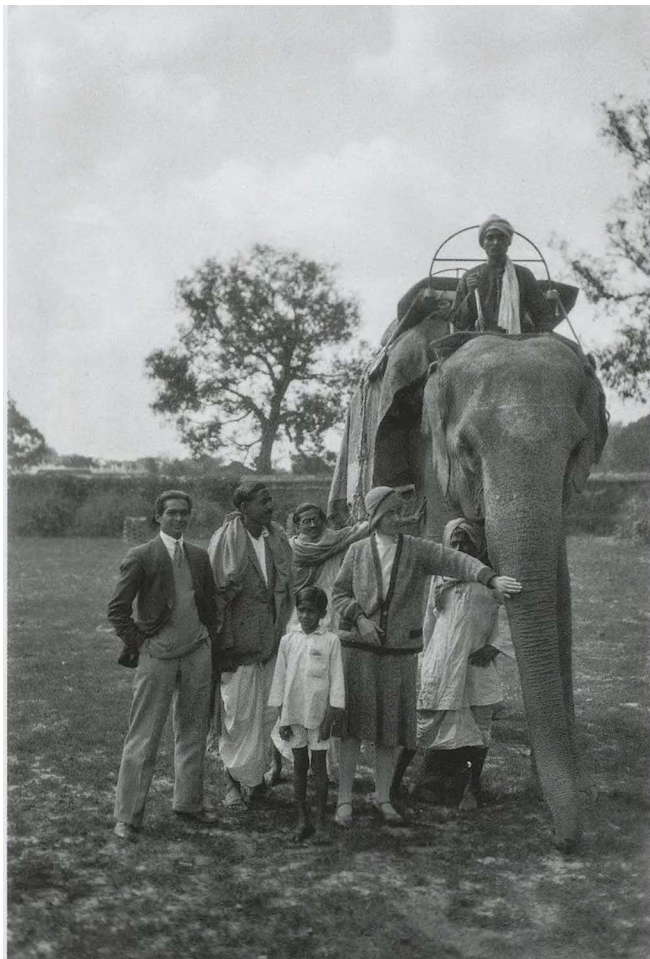
Johannes Beltz and Andrea Kuratli

In the early 20th century, India began to hold a growing fascination for the creative intelligentsia in the West. Among them was the Italian-born Swiss artist Alice Boner (1889–1981), who in 1935 moved to Varanasi, where she would remain for over 40 years. Captivated by the rhythms, colours and shapes of her surroundings, Alice processed her impressions of the city into numerous sketches and paintings. Perhaps more importantly, however, she discovered in India the inner symbolic and religious dimensions of its sacred art, which she also sought to express in her work. While some of her artwork is housed in the Museum Rietberg in Zurich, Alice Boner is also celebrated in India, where a permanent Alice Boner Gallery was inaugurated in Bharat Kala Bhavan, the museum of Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi, in 1989.

Born in Italy to Swiss parents, after graduating from the Italian education system Alice went on to study painting and sculpture. She enrolled at the Ernest Blanc-Garin School of Art in Brussels in 1907 and continued her studies in Munich and in Basel, where she was taught by the renowned Swiss sculptor Carl Burckhardt (1878–1923). Coming from an open-minded and wealthy family (her uncle was a board member of today's multinational company ABB), she was able to study without financial constraints. When her family moved back to Switzerland in 1911 she settled with them in Zurich, by which time she had begun to work independently as a sculptor, and she held her first exhibition at Zurich's prestigious Museum of Modern Art



Alice reading the newspaper in her studio
Photographer unknown, Zurich, c. 1926–28
Nitrocellulose, 8.3 x 5.7 cm
Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Bequest of Alice Boner (ABF 309-5)



Alice Boner, Uday and Ravi Shankar with an elephant
 Photographer unknown, Nazrathpur, 1930
 Nitrocellulose, 7.4 x 4.7 cm
 Museum Rietberg, Zurich
 Bequest of Alice Boner (ABF 413-5)

(Kunsthaus Zurich) in 1916. By 1925 she had her own studio, located close to the University of Zurich.

Alice travelled frequently within Europe, but between 1925 and 1928 she ventured further afield, journeying to both Morocco and Tunisia. During her travels she observed the local people and their daily lives, as well as the provincial landscapes, documenting everything in photographs, sketches and drawings. However, it was India that attracted her the most, and she finally gained access to the country through the Indian dancer Uday Shankar (1900–77), whose career in Europe and the US she helped to launch; in fact, she contributed significantly to Shankar's success. Alice got to know him in 1926, at one of his performances in Zurich. Uday Shankar performed a kind of modern Indian dance inspired by both India's classical dance traditions

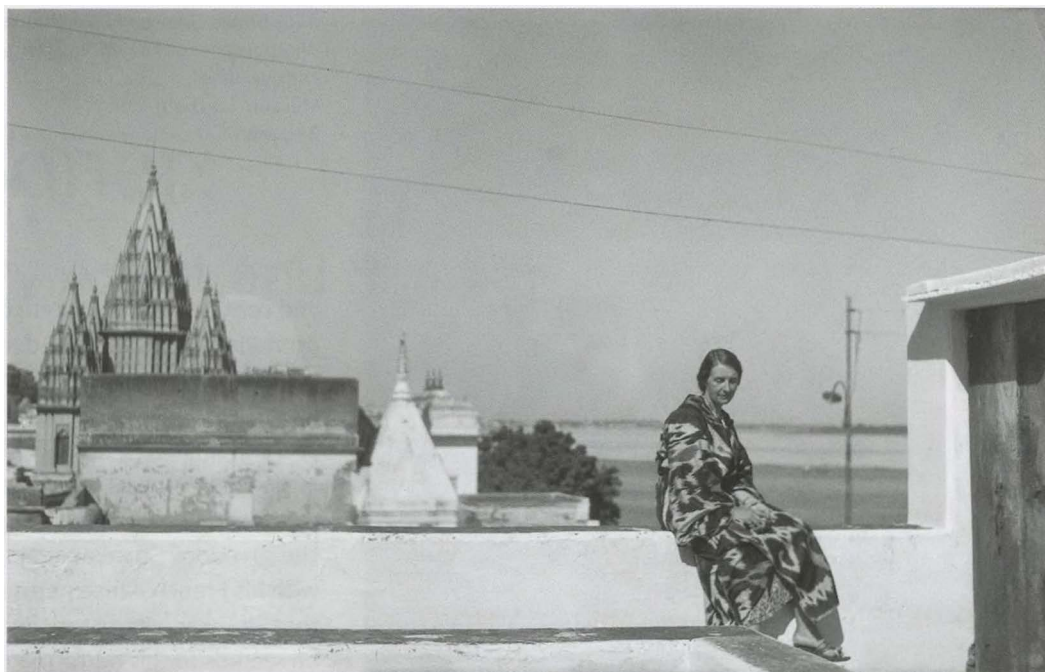
and contemporary Western dancers. Seeing him on stage, Alice was immediately intrigued by the elegant movements of his art. She therefore invited him to dance for her in her studio, so that she could photograph him and make sketches of him dancing.

In 1928 Alice moved to Paris, where she continued her work as a sculptor. It was there that she saw Uday Shankar again, in 1929, performing with his French dance partner Simkie. Hearing that Shankar was dissatisfied at having to depend on records for his performances as he had no live Indian musicians, Alice decided to support him, and in 1930 they travelled to India in search of suitable musicians, instruments and dancers. For Alice, who had long dreamed of going to India, this was a unique opportunity. After their return to Paris at the end of October 1930, until 1935, Alice supported and managed Shankar's dance troupe, supervising their performances and tours and advertising them, as well as helping with costumes and correspondence. However, a disagreement took place and they decided to separate. Feeling that she had sacrificed her own art long enough, Alice soon went back to India, which she found to be a great source of inspiration for both her life and work.

One might wonder why Alice settled in Varanasi, to which city she returned in October 1935. Firstly, Varanasi was one of the oldest and holiest settlements in India. Travelogues from the time show that the city was already a pilgrimage destination for Westerners, and indeed, Alice Boner was not the only Westerner to go there—a number of others, among them art historians and scholars, were then living in Varanasi as well. But what was Alice looking for, precisely? Her diaries, as well as numerous sketches and photographs, offer an insight into her thoughts about her time in and her perception of the city.

In her diaries, Alice records in detail her first visit to Varanasi, with Uday Shankar in 1930. Arriving in the city late at night, the streets were empty apart from the cows, which were lying there asleep wherever one looked. The next morning—it was 4

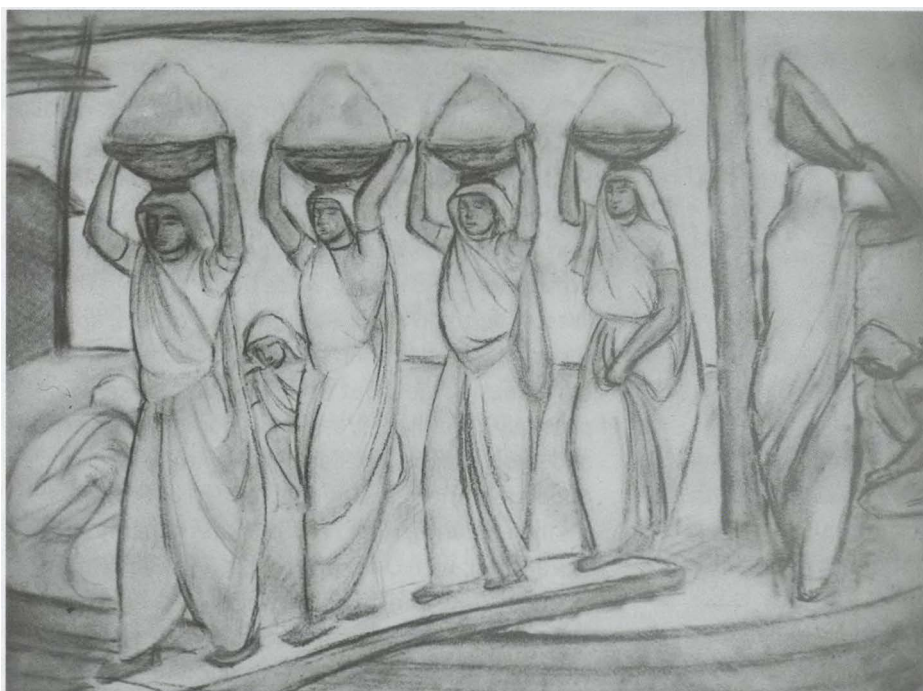
Alice Boner on her roof terrace
Photographer unknown,
Varanasi, c. 1936–45
Nitrocellulose, 4 x 6.3 cm
Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Bequest of Alice Boner (ABF 349-1)



February—Alice thought herself in a wonderland. She was surrounded by a magnificent show of flowers and trees. This blaze of colour was reflected in the dresses of the women at the ghats, and grew even more intense as the sun began to set. Although she described the alleys as an 'eerie labyrinth' even in daylight, she felt a liking for the hustle and bustle of

the city (A. Boner, 1984, pp. 15–24). It was the great variety and colourfulness of Indian daily life that brought Alice back to Varanasi in 1935 and provided her with the necessary inspiration for her art.

With the help of friends, Alice looked for suitable accommodation, and stumbled upon a house right at Assi Sangam, the meeting point of the rivers Assi and



Women Carrying Sand
By Alice Boner (1889–1981),
Varanasi, c. 1935–38
Charcoal on paper, 50.5 x 66 cm
Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Bequest of Alice Boner (AB 1566)

Ganga. She was overwhelmed by her good fortune. 'This house is a strangely soothing and exciting matter. In it I feel withdrawn into myself, into my house, my home. It is so familiar, so welcoming, so warm ... I feel fulfilled, happy, settled, and supported, like on a gentle stream,' she wrote in her diary (Alice Boner, Diary 6: 1934–37, pp. 118–19, Alice Boner Archives, Museum Rietberg; translated from the German). The house became the centre of her new life in India, and blossomed through her ability to fill it with life. Whenever musicians came to Varanasi, Alice invited them to the house. Her roof terrace was



On the Ghat

By Alice Boner (1889–1981), Varanasi, c. 1940
Watercolour on paper, 71.5 x 56 cm
Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Bequest of Alice Boner (2013.120)



Mother Earth

By Alice Boner (1889–1981), Varanasi, c. 1951
Oil on canvas, 88 x 70 cm
Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Purchase, Boner Foundation for Arts and Culture (2013.119)

turned into a stage for various artists, and her friends and visitors came to enjoy the performances. Alice felt so at home in Varanasi that apart from trips in India and back to Switzerland, she never left the city. She fell ill on her last visit to Switzerland, and was bedridden until she passed away, in Zurich in 1981. Her ashes were returned to Mother Ganga, with whom she finally was united.

During her time in Varanasi Alice Boner painted continuously, and she converted the attic on her rooftop into an atelier. Although in Europe she had loved to sculpt, in Varanasi this artistic form

no longer suited her needs, the climate being too hot and life all too colourful. Instead, she sought to preserve the beauty of daily life in Varanasi through photography, drawing and painting, for the first time allocating an important role to the usage of colour. In oil as well as watercolour, Alice depicted India's vibrant life and vivid scenery in all its facets.

Alice also began to feel a growing fascination for the art, mythology and philosophy of India, and embarked upon a study of the ancient temple and cave sculptures and their composition. In June 1940, under the impact of World War II, she began

to conceptualize a series of paintings embodying the Indian understanding of time and the cycle of creation, maintenance and destruction. This major project, which would finally result in a triptych, started with a vision of Kali (representing destruction): 'Half asleep, I had a vision of Kali, dripping out of my brain in pieces like a mosaic. She danced, as one usually sees her represented, black, with the tongue hanging out, but much larger and more terrible in that she became visible only piece by piece: only an eye, just fragments of the body, the rest being bits of the world which she had cut



Prakriti
By Alice Boner (1889–1981),
Varanasi, c. 1940–50
Gouache on paper, 73 x 57 cm
Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Purchase, Boner Foundation
for Arts and Culture (2013.118)



Vishvarupa
By Alice Boner (1889–1981),
Varanasi, c. 1949
Oil on canvas, 117 x 88.5 cm
Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Gift, Archiv Arte (AB 2076)

to pieces with her sword' (G. Boner, Soni and Soni, 1993, p. 274). Later, she conceived of Krishna in the form of Vishvarupa (the self-revelation of Krishna as cosmic being who contains the entire universe) as the ideal link between creation (Prakriti) and destruction (Kali). She persistently reworked the details of her

composition, and the final version of the triptych took her almost 20 years to produce. Numerous sketches and variations exist, as in the paintings preserved in the Museum Rietberg. At present, the final version of the triptych is in Varanasi, at Bharat Kala Bhavan.



Samhara Kali

By Alice Boner (1889–1981), Varanasi, c. 1958

Oil on canvas, 133 x 100 cm

Museum Rietberg, Zurich

Purchase, Boner Foundation for Arts and Culture (2013.123)



Shiva Nataraja, Ellora Cave XIV
By Alice Boner (1889–1981), India,
Ellora or Varanasi, 1938–42
Pencil and ink on cardboard,
41.9 x 50.1 cm
Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Bequest of Alice Boner (AB 1605)

Shiva Nataraja
By Alice Boner (1889–1981),
Varanasi or Zurich, 1952–65
Pencil and watercolour
on glassine, 24 x 20.4 cm
Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Bequest of Alice Boner (AB 1941)

While in India Alice travelled all over the country, visiting all the major archaeological sites. She became particularly interested in the Hindu cave temples of Ellora, Ajanta, Badami and Mahabalipuram, and in 1941 had a first intuitive perception of a deliberate compositional planning in the sculptural forms. On 20 August, during a visit to Ellora, she noted in her diary: 'To approach the images I started drawing them. It was stiflingly hot and I was often on the point of fainting, so that I had to lie down on the ground to regain my senses. The drawings were awfully dull and inartistic. But at home, in the peace of the guesthouse I started analysing them in their geometrical scheme and to build up the diagrams in terms of lines of energy. From such an analysis, all of a sudden, a revealing light broke forth. I grasped, with my inner intuition of form that there I was really touching the hidden meaning, and that I was approaching the mystery of their unique and incomparable power of suggestion and expression ... And where I had before only seen the magnificent



composition, the powerful movement, the supremely alive modelling of form, all these more or less aesthetic considerations revealed and gave way to a symbolic, underlying conception to which they were only humble accessories' (Alice Boner, Diary 8: 1940–41, pp. 2–3, Alice Boner Archives, Museum Rietberg; translated from the German).

Although this geometric patterning did not appear everywhere and was not obvious, it had 'a definite purpose and represented the compositional build-up of these sculptures' (A. Boner, 1990, p. 7). She began to photograph and to systematically draw other sculptures and panels, and finally, in 1962, published her findings under the title *Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture*, which is probably her most significant academic work. In the preface, Alice explains that the book was not based on any theory of composition or acknowledged authority, but was 'a purely empirical approach' (ibid., p. XV). She further observed that '... lines, forms and colours are not accidental, but are direct manifestations of ... inner forces, and therefore present a perfect analogy to spiritual reality, the ultimate Cause' (ibid., p. 12). For Alice, then, the primary purpose of these sacred images was not to offer aesthetic enjoyment, 'but to serve as focusing points for the spirit ... as reflections of divine Essence they are as doors between the finite and the infinite, through which the devotee may pass from one into the other. If they are beautiful, it is because they are true' (ibid., pp. 17–18).

In 1957, Alice met a scholar of ancient architecture, Pandit Sadashiva Rath Sharma, who understood what she had realized and introduced her to a *circa* 12th century manuscript called the *Shilpa Prakasha*. Written in Sanskrit on palm leaf, this text on the temple architecture of Orissa focused primarily on a single tantric temple, and described the yantras, or symbolic diagrams, underlying its architecture and sculpture. The *Shilpa Prakasha* proved to Alice the correctness of her idea that the sculptures were carved according to strict geometric principles. Over the next decade, Sadashiva Rath Sharma and Alice together translated and analysed the text, and in 1966 released a book (see A. Boner and Sharma, 2005).

As well as an artist and a scholar Alice Boner was a collector, and during her time in Varanasi she acquired Indian sculptures, mostly affiliated with Hinduism, from sellers in the city (see Pal, 2015, pp. 86–91). Most are fragments, torsos or heads



President V. V. Giri presents the Padma Bhushan to Alice Boner
Photographer unknown, New Delhi, 1974
Gelatin silver print, baryta, 18.7 x 13.2 cm
Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Bequest of Alice Boner (ABF 37-17)

of female divinities, in stone or terracotta. While many are from North India, it is difficult to discover a coherent strategy in her acquisitions. She further acquired some 650 Indian miniatures, her collection of which is extraordinary (G. Boner, Fischer and Goswamy, 1994).

Alice did not sell a single object from her collection; in fact, she made no profit from either the collection or her connoisseurship. Instead,

she donated everything to Bharat Kala Bhavan in Varanasi and the Museum Rietberg in Zurich. Later, the major part of her private archives consisting of her photographs and personal documents and some of her own artworks was given to the Museum Rietberg, where they are preserved, exhibited and otherwise made accessible to the public. In terms of both quantity and quality, the Alice Boner collection remains among the museum's most important holdings.

Alice Boner's work did not go unnoticed. Based on her publications and other academic contributions, in 1969 she was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Zurich. However, the greatest honour was conferred upon her in 1974, when the President of India awarded her the Padma Bhushan, the third-highest civilian award in the Republic of India.

Alice intended her mission to be continued after her death, and paved the way for similar approaches to Indian culture. During her lifetime, she expressed the wish to preserve her home at Assi Ghat for further research, and in 1979 appointed the Austrian scholar Bettina Bäumer as Research Director of the newly created Alice Boner Institute. Dinanath Pathy followed as the institute's director, from 2000 to 2015, while at present the institute functions under the directorship of Harsha Vinay, and is closely associated with the Museum Rietberg. It hosts international scholars and artists wishing to stay in Varanasi and supports them in their area of interest and research, offering residencies, a library and valuable research assistance. It facilitates not only academic collaboration, but also interaction with the local artistic and academic community.

All in all, Alice Boner was an extraordinary woman. Making her home in India, through her artwork, her scholarly publications and her cooperation with various artists, she greatly added to the global understanding of Indian art. Today her work would be considered multidisciplinary (beside painting, photography and sculpture, she designed the cupboards and other furniture in her house in Varanasi), an approach that is part of her legacy. And last but not least, her name stands for cultural exchange. 'If it is true that culture is a vehicle of international understanding and those promoting it are its ambassadors, then Alice Boner, indeed, deserves to be called an Ambassador of Indian culture' said her close friend Alfred Würfel (Alfred Würfel, Reasoned justification for the nomination of Dr. [Miss] Alice Boner for the 1973 Jawarharlal Nehru

Award for International Understanding, Alice Boner Archives, Museum Rietberg). In the end, it is for the multivarious ways in which she expressed her love for her adopted country, India, that Alice is mostly to be remembered.

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An exhibition, 'Alice Boner in India—A Life for Art', is on view at the Museum Rietberg from 22 September 2017 to 14 January 2018, having already travelled to Mumbai and New Delhi. See <www.rietberg.ch>.

The Alice Boner Archives at the Museum Rietberg consist of photographs, artwork, and handwritten documents such as diaries, correspondence and manuscripts. Images can be found at <www.rietberg.ch/de-ch/sammlung/sammlung-online>.

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