

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART

Fiercely Modern: Art of the Naga Warrior
**Explores Rarely Seen 1930s-Era Material Culture of the Naga People
Who Live on the India-Burma Border**

**Exhibition Includes Large-Scale Photographs, Video, Jewelry,
Weaponry and Ceremonial Objects**

On view April 26, 2013, through September 16, 2013



Photograph of a Naga warrior
1937
WeltMuseum Wien
Collection Christoph Fürer-Haimendorf



Chest Ornament
Assam, India (Konyak-Naga)
Glass, brass, cotton,
WeltMuseum Wien
Collection John Douglas Marshall

April 4, 2013, New York, NY— Featuring a collection of rarely seen objects, photographs, and video, the Rubin Museum of Art's upcoming exhibition, *Fiercely Modern: Art of the Naga Warrior*, explores the societal evolution of the Naga people through their material culture. The exhibition includes clothing, jewelry, weapons, shields, and ceremonial objects as well as large-scale black-and-white photographs from one of the oldest collections of Naga art, assembled in the 1930s by the anthropologist Christoph Fürer-Haimendorf and now in the collection of the WeltMuseum Wien in Vienna, previously known as Museum für Volkerkunde. The exhibition will also include a video of ceremonial drumming. On view from April 26 through September 16, 2013, *Fiercely Modern* tells the story of how the Naga organized their society and celebrated their festivals with stunning displays of power and artistry.

The Naga are a group of culturally and linguistically linked tribes who live in the mountainous regions of northeastern India and northwestern Burma (Myanmar). As headhunters, they were feared and avoided by their neighbors, allowing them to develop a distinctive material culture—in which objects they created are of impressive aesthetic value and possess great symbolic importance to the community—and a complex

system of norms and taboos. The main tribal groups of the Naga include the Angami, Sema, Ao, Kalyo-Kengyu, Konyak, Lhota, Rengma, Tangkhul, Chang, Sangtam and Sema.

The British colonization of India in the 19th century and then the 20th- century conversion by Baptist missionaries of nearly the entire Naga population to Christianity resulted in drastic changes in their way of life. Today the Naga live between two extremes: they maintain a highly developed aesthetic culture informed by ancestral traditions but are a fractured society, disrupted and transformed by outside influences. Though now fervent Christians, the Naga's ancient customs and habits remain alive under a layer of Christian devotion.

“*Fiercely Modern* explores the intricate cultural heritage of the still little-known society of the Naga and provides an important opportunity to consider its trajectory within a larger historical context,” said Jan Van Alphen, Director of Exhibitions, Collections & Research at the Ruben Museum. “Through a thorough examination of the distinctive, value-laden objects, traditions, and intangible heritage of the Naga, we are able to draw parallels among the many disparate communities of the wider Himalayan region and tell a more comprehensive story of the headhunting cultures in Asia as far as the Philippines, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia.”

Enlarged black-and-white photographs of Naga people in ceremonial clothing will provide the context for the objects on view. Fürer-Haimendorf acquired the original photographs and the majority of the objects presented in this exhibition during his field research in 1936-1937. As a sympathetic chronicler of the Naga throughout his life, he supported a greater understanding of non-Western cultures and argued for the political rights of marginalized groups. His complete collection has been preserved in the WeltMuseum Wien.

The exhibition is divided into six sections:

Warriors: Symbols of Riches and Prestige

Much of Naga life revolves around the acquisition of prestige, especially for men. From feasts celebrating a full granary to the practice of headhunting, the Naga commemorated status and significant village events through ritual, the erection of sculptures, and specific dress. In particular, the practice of headhunting holds a deeply ingrained religious and cultural meaning for the Naga. While ethnologists debate the motivations behind this tradition, the Naga themselves explain that a successful headhunt brought prestige to the tribe, made one an acceptable potential husband, and entitled the victors to wear particular adornments. Highlights from this section, include:

- Head trophies such as facsimile heads carved of wood, human skull trophies, and heads woven from bamboo and rattan. A head damaged in a battle by an enemy could not be brought back to the village out of respect for the dead;
- Ceremonial hats, embellished with animal horns and furs meant to evoke the power, courage, and beauty of the animals;
- Shields, spears, and ceremonial baskets similarly embellished with leather, fur, animal hair, and monkey skulls.

Clothing

Traditionally the one piece of warm clothing worn by Naga men and women was a body cloth which could be worn wrapped around the torso or folded over the shoulder with the ends tucked into a belt. Body cloths were not worn by children. The life story of each Naga was told through symbols woven into the warp and weft of the cloth, and each cloth told of its wearer's tribe and position within the tribal hierarchy. Such body cloths are still worn over modern clothes during cultural events today. The exhibition includes:

- One striking body cloth worn by the king of Longkhai of the Konyak-Naga people. Its coloration and patterns are symbolic. The black base color stands for life's struggles. The white zigzag patterns symbolize peace, the yellow strips hunger, and the red stripes headhunting and bloodshed. The round metal disks depict wars between villages.
- Red and yellow striped tassels of goat hair worn by the wife of the village king of the Sangtam-Naga. Other women of her village could wear only body cloths featuring single-toned red threads.

Jewelry

For the Naga, jewelry is more than mere ornamentation; it serves as a symbolic descriptor of the wearer's tribal orientations and social status. This was especially true for men, whose status was based on how often he and his forefathers hosted lavish feasts, his prowess in warfare, how many heads he had taken, and, in some areas, how many extramarital affairs he could boast. Examples of jewelry include chest ornaments, earrings, headdresses, armbands, sashes, girdles, and aprons worn by both men and women.

- Wearing tiger teeth symbolizes the courage of men who have hunted and killed tigers.
- The color red in a warrior's sash connoted danger and symbolized blood and flame.
- Successful headhunters were entitled to decorate themselves in a warrior's apron woven of cotton and cane. Girls wore narrow cotton aprons as decorative belts before they reached puberty. When they came of age, they wore the aprons around the hips.
- A "warrior's tail," a small basket worn on a man's back to hold poisoned bamboo points used in battle. Decorated with red-colored human and goat hair, it was a symbol of power and prestige.

Artisanry

Specific crafts belonged strictly either to women or men. Thus, weaving was the absolute domain of women, and basket making and wood carving were typically male-dominated handicrafts. Elegantly designed and finely crafted objects were used in everyday life. The exhibition features:

- Ceremonial baskets made of bamboo that might be given by a father to his daughter on her wedding day. It would be used to carry a harvest back to the village from the fields;
- Finely woven baskets by the Konyak-Naga that were the standard unit measure for rice;
- Gracefully shaped footed dishes carved of wood used for eating.

The Morung: The Stronghold of Tradition

A key fixture in nearly all Naga settlements was the Morung, or Men's House, which served as something of a community center. It was usually the biggest and most beautifully furnished building in a village, spacious and decorated with ornate carvings. Mostly a residence for bachelors, married men could also sleep there in threat of attack or preparation for a feast of merit. Some tribes also had analogous establishments for unmarried girls. The Morung was used as a barracks, school, and youth club combined, and a boy would typically join at the age of nine or ten and live there until he was married. There he would learn the skills required for adulthood from the older members of his community: craftwork, agriculture, martial skill, and the oral traditions.

Wood Carvings and Sculpture

Numerous wooden sculptures decorated the walls and posts of the farthest end of the innermost space of the Morung. They expressed the narrative traditions of the Naga.

- A Naga man might erect a wooden sculpture near his home during a feast to represent every bull he offered for the celebration, or an organizer might demonstrate prestige by exhibiting sculpted wooden panels on the façade of his home.
- Wooden carvings of erotic subject matter posted on the walls of the Morung were not uncommon and thought to relate to fertility.
- Artists made grave monuments and decorations for the Morung: pillars and crossbeams were decorated in bold relief with symbols for the headhunt like hornbills, tigers, elephants, and carved human skulls.

The most impressive woodcarvings were the giant log drums, which are shown in a video in the exhibition alongside models of dugout drums. These enormous stationary instruments carved from a single tree trunk were taken from the jungle according to strict ritual. Once a seer has been blessed with the vision of a particular tree, it is cut down, hollowed out, and brought into the village with great ceremony by the entire community. The dugout drums embodied the community's potential for happiness and brought with them good luck, wealth, and prosperity. They also functioned as a communication instrument and were used to rapidly spread the news of a fire, an enemy attack, a successful headhunt, or the death of a distinguished villager across a distance of several miles.

This is the Rubin Museum's second exhibition exploring Naga life and culture. In 2009 the museum

presented *Nagas: Hidden Hill People of India*, an exhibition of color photographs capturing contemporary Naga life by Pablo Bartholomew.

RELATED PROGRAMS:

Key Talk

April 28 at 3:00 p.m.

Anthropologist Christian Schicklgruber and collector of Naga art John D. Marshall will discuss the contemporary lives and material culture of the people of Nagaland. \$12. Free to members.

Lunch Matters

During the month of September, Lunch Matters, the museum's Wednesday lunchtime film series, will feature documentary films about the Naga people. \$10 includes museum admission. Free for members. Attendees are encouraged to purchase lunch at Café Serai and bring it into the theater. Check the website for additional dates and titles: www.rmanyc.org/lunchmatters.

September 4 at 1:00 p.m.

Two short films:

The Story of a House

Directed by Sophy Lasuh and Sesino Yhoshu, Running time: 5 minutes, 2012

The 55 residents of one house live in Nagaland during the day and sleep in Myanmar each night. A very rare meeting with the tribal chief reveals why this is and how it is possible.

Apfutsa (Grandfather)

Directed by Sesino Yhoshu, Running time: 8:56, 2009

Apfutsa is an intimate portrait of the filmmaker's grandfather as he reflects upon his life experiences in Nagaland. The film, also a portrait of the region itself, brings us from his childhood, through the loss of his daughter and father during the Indian occupation, and into the present day.

Special Selection of Naga Merchandise in the Rubin Museum Shop

During the exhibition *Fiercely Modern*, the Rubin Museum Shop will support the culture of the Naga people living in northwestern Burma through the sale of contemporary merchandise.

Naga women of the Sema, Western Regma, Angami, Chang, Yimsungr, and Ao tribes continue to weave fabric using traditional back-strap looms. The woven cotton and sometimes hemp pieces feature the distinctive designs of their tribes. After the cloth has been woven, small patches of embroidery are sometimes added using a porcupine needle. They are finished with knotted tassels and can be used as garments or in the home as table runners or wall hangings.

- Contemporary Body Cloths from Burma, used by men and women and are wrapped around the body to keep the chill out. Most cloths have distinctive patterns, are handwoven from cotton in various sizes (approx. 71" x 21"). Price range: \$245 - 325
- Table Runners, approx. 69" x 21", Price: \$100 each

Jewelry/Adornment

- Contemporary Necklaces – multi strands of single color beads, Price range: \$40
- Distinctive one-of-a kind, vintage necklaces of tubular glass and shell beads; and brass heads, conch shell and beads, Price range: up to \$700 each

Ceremonial Blades (daos)

- One-of-a-kind sword-like tools. Graceful, slender blades with bamboo handles and feathers. Can be mounted as home décor items. Price range: \$250 - \$350 each

ABOUT THE RUBIN MUSEUM:

The Rubin Museum of Art's immersive environment stimulates learning, promotes understanding, and inspires personal connections to the ideas, cultures, and art of Himalayan Asia. The only museum in the U.S. dedicated to the Himalayan region, the Rubin has welcomed more than one million visitors since its founding in 2004. Its outstanding collections of Tibetan, Chinese, Indian, Afghan, Bhutanese, Mongolian, Nepalese, and Pakistani art, which include photography, are complemented by a diverse array of films, on-stage conversations, concerts, and special events. The Museum's education, community, and access programming is dedicated to providing audiences of all ages and backgrounds with multidimensional experiences that foster dialogue and active engagement with the traditions and cultures of the Himalayas. The Rubin Museum's Café Serai and shop are also inspired by the region and serve as a natural extension of the gallery and programming experience.

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