

# Alice Boner (1889–1981) and Promoda Charan Mitra (1901–1976): A Forgotten Significant Encounter

**Abstract.** This chapter analyses a central encounter in the life of the Swiss artist and scholar Alice Boner (1889–1981) in the form of her forty-year relationship with Promoda Charan Mitra (1901–1976), a Bengali lawyer she met in 1935 in Varanasi. Studying Alice’s diaries, photographs, and drawings, as well as correspondence between the two, it aims to identify the roles Promoda Charan Mitra played in Alice Boner’s personal, intellectual, and artistic life, as well as her understanding and rendering of India through this specific encounter. Questioning Promoda Charan Mitra’s absence in the scholarship on Alice Boner, the chapter also shows Mitra’s agency in this encounter and in its reception.

**Keywords.** Alice Boner, Promoda Charan Mitra, art history, orientalism, India-Switzerland

Alice Boner (1889–1981) was a Swiss artist and scholar who spent half of her life in India, in a simple but beautiful house situated on the banks of the Ganga River in Varanasi.<sup>1</sup> There, she became fascinated with Indian art, mythology, and philosophy. She travelled throughout the subcontinent to visit shrines and temples where she studied extensively artistic motifs and sculptures, which she then incorporated in her art.<sup>2</sup> She also engaged with Indian texts and thought, and published several books and articles related to Indian art history.<sup>3</sup>

In Varanasi, as well as in the different places she stayed in India, Alice Boner developed an important network: a mix of intellectuals, artists, people from the

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1 I came to know of Alice Boner in 2015 when Maya Burger drew my attention to the fact that I could go for a month’s residence as a researcher in Alice’s house in Varanasi. I spent there the hottest month of August of my life but have fond memories of my stay in this beautiful and inspiring place. With a view on Assi Ghat from my window and terrace, I could sense the energising and tremendous life taking place on the sacred riverbank twenty-four hours a day.

2 Beltz 2021: 330–331.

3 See her bibliography in G. Boner/Fischer 1982: 126. For a general overview of her life and work, see Kuratli/Beltz 2014.

aristocracy and from royal families, scholars sharing her interests for Indian arts and politics. Especially, she shared a long friendship with the musicologist and Indologist Alain Daniélou (1907–1994), his partner the Swiss photographer Raymond Burnier (1912–1968), and Alfred Würfel (1911–2011), a German Indologist she first met in Paris in 1932. They all lived in Varanasi during the same period around 1940.<sup>4</sup>

In many of the studies dedicated to Alice Boner, her strong network and the important encounters she made in her life are indexed.<sup>5</sup> But very little is written about her forty-year relationship with Promoda Charan Mitra (1901–1976).<sup>6</sup> Yet this man is extensively present in the archives we have about Alice Boner.<sup>7</sup> Promoda Charan Mitra, alias Montu, is mentioned in Alice's diaries since 1937;<sup>8</sup> the two corresponded with one another for forty years from 1935 to Mitra's death in 1976;<sup>9</sup> and he appears on 307 photographs and three drawings in her collection.

This chapter aims to highlight this forgotten significant encounter in Alice Boner's life, trying to identify the roles Promoda Charan Mitra played in Alice Boner's personal, intellectual, and artistic exchanges, as well as her apprehen-

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4 Several pictures from the Alice Boner Collection at the Museum Rietberg in Zurich attest these friendships. See, for example, ABF 32-110.

5 Beside her prestigious encounters (with, for example, Rabindranath Tagore, Vallathol Narayan Menon, Jawaharlal Nehru, etc.), Alice Boner patronised artists such as Uday Shankar, Ustad Allauddin Khan, and Shanta Rao, among others.

6 The only mention is found in the book written by Kuratli and Beltz on the occasion of a collaborative exhibition called "Alice from Switzerland: A Visionary Artist and Scholar Across Two Continents" organised by the Museum Rietberg in Zurich and the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya in Mumbai in 2014. See Kuratli/Beltz 2014: 30–31, and for the photographs, 36–39. The authors also mention the 707 letters of their correspondence (30).

7 These archives are preserved at the Museum Rietberg in Zurich and contain not only an important collection of Indian art but also Alice's personal archive, including her diaries, correspondence, and photo collection. I thank Esther Tici and Josef Huber for their support in the archives and Johannes Beltz for his precious help, particularly his information regarding the collection and our discussions about Alice Boner and Promoda Charan Mitra.

8 A selection of Alice's diaries was edited and published by her sister Georgette Boner with Luitgard Soni and Jayandra Soni. This book, published in German and English editions in 1993, is referred to in citations hereinafter as *Alice Boner Diaries*, with quotations from the English edition. The original diaries, letters, and photographs from Alice's personal archive at Rietberg are cited here with the date and, where known, the place and archival reference number. Alice's diary entries quoted here and the letters exchanged with Mitra are in English, despite Boner's mother tongue being German, and Mitra's Bengali. I have lightly edited them for sense or added bracketed clarifications but otherwise preserved their original style and content.

9 The majority of this correspondence are letters written by Alice Boner since they were preciously kept aside by Promoda Charan Mitra from the beginning of their exchanges. Yet some letters by him are included. The last letter we have in the collection is dated from 15 January 1975, but Alice writes in her diary on 18 March 1976 that she has received a letter from Montu.

sion, understanding, and rendering of India through him. Alice Boner is a figure through whom we can understand and study India–Europe connected history.<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, we shall focus on her relationship with Promoda Charan Mittra as a key to understanding that history. In Alice’s biographical path—the point of departure of Carlo Ginzburg’s microhistory—her encounter with Montu is the mirror of global issues and intertwined realities. These aspects will be discussed below following three points. First, in section 1, we will present Promoda Charan Mittra’s private relationship with Alice Boner and question his presence/absence in Alice’s archives and works on her. In the second section we will show how, from an orientalist perspective, she projected onto him her own perception and understanding of the Indian heritage. And finally, in section 3 we will attempt to demonstrate that Promoda Charan Mittra was an essential pillar of her artistic and scholarly work in and on India.

## 1 The presence/absence of Promoda Charan Mittra

We do not know much about Promoda Charan Mittra, but the correspondence he exchanged with Alice Boner reveals information about his life and personality. Alice met him in India, most probably in the second half of 1935. She was already forty-six years old, and he was thirty-four. The first letter we have in their correspondence is dated 24 December 1935 from Mumbai and written by Alice: “Dear Mr. Mitra, As you see, I am still here, in the bondage of my second life. And I don’t know yet when I will be released.”<sup>11</sup> At the time, she was travelling with the dance company she was directing with Uday Shankar on a tour through India.<sup>12</sup> She was

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10 Alice Boner is herself a figure who needs more attention from the scholarship to understand her role in that history. From this perspective, see, for example, the chapter written by Beltz/Kuratli 2013 in a volume that discusses the history of exchanges between European intellectuals and India in the twentieth century. Also of relevance is a thesis currently being written by Diane Hartmann at the University of Lausanne provisionally titled “Pratiques dansées et religions de l’Inde. Revivification et traduction dans l’œuvre d’Alice Boner”.

11 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mittra, 24 December 1935, Bombay (place names are retained as written in the sources). In her diary, the first mention of “Montu” appears in an entry dated 2 April 1937. But she did not write frequently during this period, writing on 23 July 1935 (one day after her birthday), then on 27 January 1936, and then on 27 February 1936, where she mentions the house she found in Varanasi. There are then no entries until 22 February 1937.

12 This is most probably what she means by “the bondage of my second life”, travelling throughout India with the dance company. As will be discussed in section 2, going to India was something Alice had wanted to do for many years. This huge step in her life—her real encounter with India—was the beginning of her “second life”. The first life was her artistic life in Europe.

also looking for a house in Varanasi and asked different people to assist her, Mitra included: “Did you by any chance find for me the sacred abode on the Ganges?”<sup>13</sup>

Mitra was a Bengali lawyer. He lived in Varanasi and was unmarried.<sup>14</sup> According to Alice’s letters, he played cricket and travelled for this purpose: “My dear Mr. Mitra, I don’t know how long this cricket match will go on [for], but still I have a strong hope that some day you might return to Benares.”<sup>15</sup>

The correspondence between Alice and Mitra is much varied in its form and content: from brief notes to long letters, from exchanges of information to personal matters, from letters written when both were in Varanasi to long-distance letters. Alice was more at ease with writing than “Montu”, as she started to call him. She often chastises him for failing to answer her letters, or for being too brief or not personal enough in his writing. This figures throughout the whole corpus of correspondence, especially when she is away for months on end, as she was in 1940. Writing from Rajpur in August that year:

My dear Montu,  
[. . .]

You very kindly support [suggest?] that I should continue to write often, without waiting for a reply from you. I feel very flattered at the idea that you are to[o] anxious to receive letters from you and I would like to do as you wish.<sup>16</sup> But you see, when I write letters<sup>17</sup> and no reaction what so ever comes forth from what I write, I loose [*sic*] all inspiration and don’t know any more what to write. It is just like knocking and calling [on] a locked door and receiving no reply from within. Well, you feel there is nobody and you go away! [. . .] Correspondence should be like a ball which is thrown and returned immediat[e]ly. There is amusement and interest in the game only when it is swift and lively. But if you have to wait a fortnight for a reply which by then is necessarily out of date, it becomes dull and state [static?] like a Sunday sermon.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Alice *was* a prolific writer.<sup>19</sup> Over the years Montu became increasingly impatient to receive her letters<sup>20</sup> and they developed a strong relationship. They

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13 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mitra, 24 December 1935, Bombay.

14 Kuratli/Beltz 2014: 30.

15 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mitra, 5 February 1936, place unrecorded. See also her letters from 24 December 1935 (Bombay) and 14 July 1945 (Binsar) for references to cricket.

16 I have retained this sentence as it appears in the original letter, but Alice surely means “anxious to receive letters from *me*” (not *you*).

17 Underlining in the original is retained throughout.

18 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mitra, 22 August 1940, Rajpur.

19 This is attested by the diaries she wrote from 1920 through her entire life.

20 See, for example, his letter dated 11 September 1963, Kalkutta.

met daily when they were in Varanasi,<sup>21</sup> travelled together (even in Europe), and took care of each other.<sup>22</sup> In his memoirs, Daniélou notes their intimate and long relationship with the light tone that characterised his style:

One fine day, Alice had had enough. She left the troupe in the middle of a tour and returned to India with a young Bengali lawyer, Montu Mittra, who was to be her faithful companion for many years and who died in 1975.<sup>23, 24</sup>

This growing intimacy figures throughout their correspondence and is sometimes expressed in romantic tones. For example, when Alice left India in 1946, she wrote, while on board the *S.S. Strathaird*:

I have been the whole day watching from the decks of the boat, but unfortunately I could not even have a glimpse of you. It worries me, what prevented you from coming[?] [Like] yesterday, you definitely promised you would be here again to see me. It is agonising to know that you are so near and yet invisible. It greatly adds to my Bombay general misery and discomfort.<sup>25</sup>

In a letter written later in the voyage, she writes:

I was terribly sad not to see you the next day when you had promised to come. I stood on deck nearly the whole day, till my back was too much [in pain], but not a glimpse of you was to be seen. The third day also some visitors came, but not for me! It still worries me, why you did not come.<sup>26</sup>

And finally, we learn from her diary:

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21 In the archives, I found many notes in which Alice asked Montu to come round for lunch, dinner, or some other reason.

22 Many passages are related to their health condition. In a letter dated 14 July 1945 (Bin-sar), Alice shares with Montu a recipe given to her “by an American lady, and which seems to be excellent for stomach trouble”.

23 According to Alice’s diary, Montu is dead in 1976, the year I have given for his death in this paper. On 20 May 1976 she writes that she has received a letter announcing his death on 10 May (8 May is also written in brackets).

24 Daniélou 2015 [1981]: 95, my translation. The original French reads: “Un beau jour, Alice en eut assez. Elle abandonna la troupe au milieu d’une tournée et repartit pour l’Inde en compagnie d’un jeune avocat bengali, Montu Mittra, qui devait être son fidèle compagnon pendant de nombreuses années et qui mourut en 1975.” Daniélou relates, in an expeditious mode and with some inexactness, Alice’s encounter with Mittra when she was working and travelling with Uday Shankar. We shall return to this in section 2. See also footnote 35. We find another mention of “Montu Mittra” in Daniélou’s memoirs, on page 193: “J’avais été introduit chez Vizi par l’ami d’Alice, l’avocat Montu Mittra, qui était très lié au Mahârâj-Kumâr.” “Vizi” was the name given by the British to the Maharaja Kumar of Vizianagram.

25 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mittra, 29 July 1946, *S.S. Strathaird*.

26 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mittra, 4 August 1946, *S.S. Strathaird*.

A letter has come from Montu in the meantime, and I learnt that my guessing was right, that he felt too much to be able to see me again.<sup>27</sup>

Contrary to what we can find in Alice's diaries and in her correspondence with Montu, the first and unique mention of Promoda Charan Mittra in the scholarship, as we said, dates from 2014. If this is understandable for books focusing on her work and legacy<sup>28</sup>—even if a mention in her biography could have been inserted—this is more intriguing in a book like *India: My Karma*, written by Alfred Würfel and published in 2004. In Würfel's recollections of India, Alice Boner is mentioned several times and two subchapters are dedicated to her, one focused on his encounter and friendship with Alice and a second one on her life and work. Although Würfel spent much time with Montu, as is attested in Alice's diaries, photographs, and correspondence, there is no mention of the Bengali in his memoirs. For example, talking of a visit to Khajuraho, he says that he had “the privilege of seeing the temples under the guidance of Alice Boner”,<sup>29</sup> focusing on the chance he had to share moments with Alice, whom he considered one of his mentors, but not mentioning Montu even though he was also part of the trip.<sup>30</sup> More evident is a second example with a picture inserted in his book. Würfel shows a series of photographs illustrating his life and prestigious encounters in India: his friend the Raja of Kuchaman, Indira Gandhi, and the president Dr S. Radhakrishnan. On two pages side by side, three pictures illustrate his friendship with Alice Boner: a portrait of her with the caption “Alice Boner, the sculptor, at Banaras in 1937”,<sup>31</sup> a picture of him with Alice and Uday Shankar in Varanasi in 1935,<sup>32</sup> and a picture of Rabindranath Tagore, accompanied by Würfel and Mittra (Fig. 1).

The picture is captioned “Rabindranath Tagore received me at Almora in 1937”. Since it is Alfred Würfel's memoir, the focus is naturally on *his* story, but this meeting had been organised by Alice Boner and she wanted Montu to be there, as is attested in a letter.<sup>33</sup> But Montu's name is not even included in the image caption.

This gap between the presence of Montu in Alice Boner's life and archives, and the absence of Promoda Charan Mittra as a “significant encounter”—or even as an encounter—in the writings on and around Alice Boner is astonishing. To un-

27 Alice's diary (1941–1948): 198.

28 As, for example, *Rūpa Pratirūpa* edited by Bettina Bäumer in 1982 or *Alice Boner und die Kunst Indiens*, edited by Georgette Boner and Eberhard Fischer in 1982.

29 Würfel 2004: 82.

30 This visit took place in April 1937. See *Alice Boner Diaries*, 37–41, and section 2 below where this visit is discussed in detail.

31 This picture was taken by Würfel and is in the Alice Boner Collection, Museum Rietberg Zürich, ABF 31-27.

32 Alice Boner Collection, Museum Rietberg Zürich, ABF 309-14.

33 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mittra, 11 January 1937, Kalkutta.

**FIGURE 1** Untitled [Rabindranth Tagore with Montu Mittra and Alfred Würfel], India, Almora 1937–1938. Gelatine silver baryta paper, 4.4 × 6.8 cm. Credit: Alice Boner Collection, Museum Rietberg Zurich, ABF 17-4.



derstand the life and work of a historical figure, one should consider a forty-year friendship, even if that friend is not an intellectual, artist, politician, or member of a royal family. Why are we confronted with this ambivalence? Was this something emanating from Alice herself? For example, did she try to maintain a clear line between her private and professional life when it came to transcribing her life and legacy? In a short autobiography written in Varanasi in 1978 and published in *Alice Boner und die Kunst Indiens*,<sup>34</sup> Alice does not say a word about Montu and in the fourteen photographs illustrating her life, none of them show her in his company. Perhaps, so long as it was in her hands or in the hands of her relatives, she did not want exposed what she considered her private life. This would explain why Daniélou, who speaks of Alice with some irony and distance,<sup>35</sup> evokes Alice and Montu's relationship in his memoirs while Würfel, closer and loyal to Alice, remains silent.

But this theory can no longer be sustained since, as we shall see, a clear delimitation between Alice's private and professional life did not in fact exist.<sup>36</sup> Promoda

34 Boner 1982 in G. Boner/Fischer 1982.

35 In the quotation cited above, Daniélou suggests that Alice left Uday Shankar to go with Montu Mittra. Talking of Alice's encounter with Uday Shankar, he says: "C'est là qu'il rencontra Alice Boner, une jeune suisse de Zurich, héritière d'une importante fortune industrielle. Alice s'intéressa à ce très beau jeune homme et décida de le ramener en Inde pour lui faire étudier sérieusement la danse indienne" (Daniélou 2015 [1981]: 94). About Alice herself: "Elle fut ma voisine pendant de nombreuses années à Bénarès. Avec Raymond, nous étions les seuls autres étrangers à vivre dans la cité. Elle avait confiance en Raymond parce qu'il était suisse mais elle se méfiait quelque peu de moi. Je m'étais en effet totalement intégré dans la vie hindoue. Je parlais et écrivais couramment la langue. Alice resta toujours une Européenne s'intéressant à l'Inde. Elle ne porta jamais le sari, insistait pour s'asseoir du côté des hommes dans les réceptions ou les concerts" (95).

36 Alice was most probably aware of these intertwined spheres and did not try to completely erase their trace as she donated her entire collection of photographs to the Museum Rietberg, as well as her correspondence with Montu.

Charan Mittra was active in both spheres and in the two sections below we will try to highlight his role in Alice Boner's network and art.

## 2 Montu, the "Oriental"

Alice Boner was fascinated by India from a young age<sup>37</sup> and she engaged deeply with its cultural and spiritual heritage in her art. She first went to India in 1930 with the dancer Uday Shankar, whom she met in Zurich in 1926 during a performance held in the Kursaal.<sup>38</sup> For her, the dancer "was the insider to this world who knew two Indian languages"<sup>39</sup> and who gave her the concrete opportunity to travel to India. Uday Shankar was the medium through which Alice was able to connect with India and its culture, which she had known only through her imagination and readings. This was an important moment, representing the beginning of her "second life".

With Uday Shankar, Alice engaged deeply in the study of body movement for her work called "The Indian dancer".<sup>40</sup> She took dozens of pictures of him while dancing, assuming poses or in front of sculpted representations. Urmimala Sarkar Munsî, analysing Alice Boner's work in collaboration with Uday Shankar, points to the seriousness of her work and their "cross-pollination". Nevertheless, she judiciously remarks that "Shankar is represented in Boner's art as an Oriental subject/dancer".<sup>41</sup> Indeed, despite her deep and sincere interest in India and Indian art, and her pioneering inclusion of Indian themes in her art, we can also find in her representation of India the construction of a phantasmatic Orient. This is also observable in her writings about Montu and in some of the photographs she took of him.

Alice Boner's relationship with Uday Shankar deteriorates from 1935,<sup>42</sup> the same year she met Promoda Charan Mittra and decided to settle in Varanasi. Although Mittra is not an artist and the relationship he shared with Alice was different from the one she shared with Uday Shankar, we can trace similarities in both encounters. First, Montu was also an "insider to this world" and a new medium through which Alice was able to get an access to India. And second, she pursued with him—although to a lesser extent—the work she had started with Uday Shan-

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37 Kuratli/Beltz 2014: 17.

38 Kuratli/Beltz 2014: 17. Alice Boner and Uday Shankar's friendship and mutual artistic influence is well studied. See, for example, most recently, Sarkar Munsî 2021.

39 Sarkar Munsî 2021: 24.

40 Dance and movement were already a theme in Alice Boner's artistic research before her encounter with Uday Shankar. See G. Boner 1982.

41 Sarkar Munsî 2021: 48.

42 Sarkar Munsî 2021: 44.



kar in photographing and drawing Montu in various circumstances and places in the same “Oriental subject” position.

In 1935 Alice was more familiar with India as she travelled around the sub-continent, visited many places, and met many personalities. But Promoda Charan Mittra’s entry into her life was probably of great help and maybe a reason for her decision to settle in Varanasi, the place where Montu was then living. He very soon became a pillar in her personal life. Two excerpts written the same day in her diary exemplify Alice’s perception of Montu as an “insider”. Projecting her own understanding of India, she identifies and essentialises Mittra as part of the culture and the land where he grew up. This was written on 2 April 1937, narrating Alice and Montu’s journey to Khajuraho in the company of Burnier, Daniélou, and Würfel.

In the afternoon we drove with Montu’s brother to Govindghar [ . . . ]. Then the journey went on, over hilly terrain on the summit of which there was, among lonely forests inhabited by tigers, another small trianon; and then through plains with flaming red trees. Montu climbed one of the trees in order to pluck a twig for me. How nice he looked up there, one with the tree, the branches and the flowers!

I almost forgot to mention the second evening. I went with Montu and Alfred to the temples in moonlight. Captivated and overwhelmed, we could hardly tear ourselves away from the spot. Montu too shared the enthusiasm of us Europeans, though in a more measured and less enduring way. Finally he slipped away from us and went up a temple. Indeed, from a distance his appearance was in such harmony with the surrounding, a rock of these rocks, a life of these spirits, all this is his, belongs to him, and is not anything alien or mysterious, as for us: this moon, this landscape, these forms, these colours are in his blood, are part of his self; why, then, should the delight extricate him from himself?

She goes on, developing the image of an eternal, maternal, and great Indian past:

But why this fascination of ours about what is strange and new, this fascination which causes an oblivion of our origin, of our past? Is it the case that something here encompasses us, something that is further back, greater, deeper and more maternal than everything around us at home?<sup>43</sup>

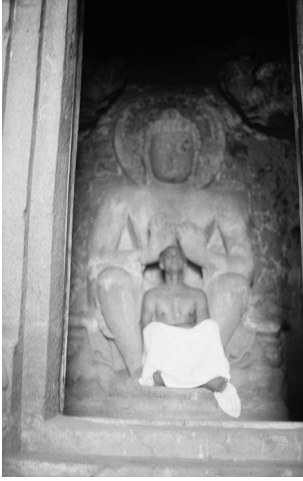
This perception of Montu as an embodiment of India and of the Indian cultural heritage is pursued in a series of photographs taken in Aurangabad in 1938.

In the way the visual representation was thought and executed, it is as if Montu were receiving the teaching directly from the Buddha statue,<sup>44</sup> as if there were a

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43 *Alice Boner Diaries*, 237, 240.

44 I thank Simone Voegtle for her confirmation of the statue being a representation of the Buddha and for her identification of the two Bodhisattvas at the entrance of cave number two in Aurangabad.



**FIGURE 2** Untitled [Montu Mitra in front of rock relief], India, Aurangabad 1938. Cellulose nitrate, 4×6.3 cm. Credit: Alice Boner Collection, Museum Rietberg Zurich, ABF 296-56.



**FIGURE 3** Ohne Titel [Montu Mitra in front of rock relief] India, Aurangabad 1938. Cellulose nitrate, 4×6.3 cm. Credit: Alice Boner Collection, Museum Rietberg Zurich, ABF 296-55.

direct and concrete connection between the human and the divine. Montu is completely embedded within the representation, as if there were no distance between the sacred representation and he, a total continuity. Moreover, in the scenography designed by Alice there is a symmetry between the sculpture and Montu's body. In Figure 2 he is seated in the same position as the statue, duplicating the posture of the Buddha. In Figure 3 Montu's arms follow the line of the Buddha's bodyside. This gives the illusion that Montu is a continuation of the statue. Sarkar Muni analyses a photograph of Uday Shankar taken in 1930 in front of a sculpture of the goddess Durga in Mahabalipuram and underlines the "continuity between the visual representation of real life and the sculpture".<sup>45</sup> In the picture, like Montu, Uday Shankar wears only a white *dhoti*. In the collection, several other photographs show the same treatment of the subject, and for some of them—like two pictures where Montu wears ornaments on his ears—the comparison with Uday Shankar could continue.

But instead I will conclude this section with the description of an event found in the correspondence between Alice and Montu which explains why Alice painted

<sup>45</sup> Sarkar Muni 2021: 47.

only three portraits of Montu, in contrast to the multiple choreographed photo portraits and pictures she took of him.

On 18 April 1936, Alice wrote:

Dear Montu, I wonder whether I may really ask you to sit once more for a portrait. You may not be very hopeful about it after the first tentative, and it may also be too irksome. Well, then you simply say no, as I quite understand. But if you are willing to give me another chance, then let me know when, any day in the early morning or in the evening, except to-day.<sup>46</sup>

Apparently, to pose as a model was more difficult for Promoda Charan Mittra than it was for Uday Shankar, possibly because of the nature of his relationship with Alice and also as a possible reaction to the vision she was projecting on him.<sup>47</sup> Following a letter written four days earlier, the tentative Alice is talking about took place during the night of 13 April. Alice apologises for having lost her patience and refers to the difficulties they must, or she must, face in their relationship. This demonstrates just how close they were:

My dear Montu,

I fear I was somewhat unpleasant last night. I feel very very sorry about it and pray you would forgive me and try to understand.

The unnatural circumstances, under which we have to live, put such a strain upon us, that at times it becomes almost intolerable [*sic*]—at least for me. And when in such a moment something intervenes, which, without any necessity, still more curtails a thing already so terribly curtailed—then it may happen that the pot overflows. . .

I know I must find within myself the strength for greater patience. Please try to help me.

Your's [*sic*] with love, Alice<sup>48</sup>

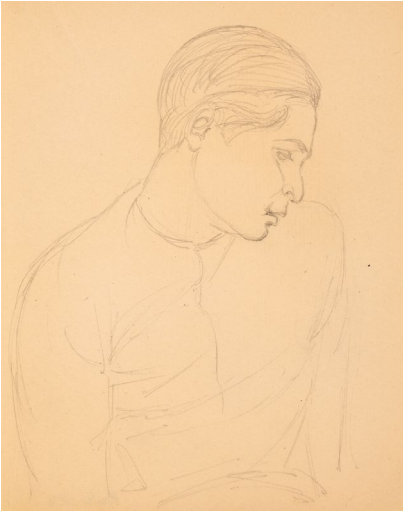
Alice finally completed two portraits of Montu that same year, in 1936, in pencil. Altogether, there are three portraits (Figures 4–6) in Alice's collection—one, a painting, is undated—while artistic photographs with Montu as the main subject (not pictures illustrating life moments) are more numerous and span a longer period of time. Nevertheless, the depiction of Montu as an Oriental subject in photographs does not continue beyond the end of the 1940s.

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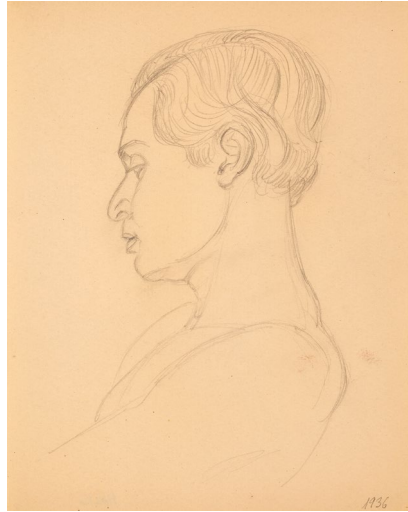
46 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mittra, 18 April 1936, place missing.

47 We will return to this in the conclusion.

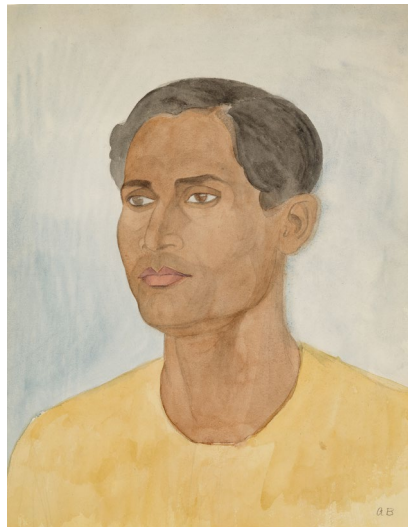
48 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mittra, 14 April, year and place missing. The year is not mentioned but the letters in the collection follow chronological order and the topics are related.



**FIGURE 4** Portrait Sketch, Man (Montu). Author: Alice Boner (1889–1981) 1936. Pencil on paper, 19.9×15.7 cm. Credit: Gift from the heirs of Alice Boner. Alice Boner Collection, Museum Rietberg Zurich, AB 655.



**FIGURE 5** Portrait Sketch, Man (Montu) Author: Alice Boner (1889–1981) 1936. Pencil on paper, 19.9×15.7 cm. Credit: Gift from the heirs of Alice Boner. Alice Boner Collection, Museum Rietberg Zurich, AB 656.



**FIGURE 6** Portrait of Montu Author: Alice Boner (1889–1981). Watercolour on paper 43.4×33.6 cm. Credit: Gift from the heirs of Alice Boner. Alice Boner Collection, Museum Rietberg Zurich, AB 1694.

### 3 Montu, the intermediary, advisor, and moral support

As an insider, Promoda Charan Mittra was supportive and helped Alice Boner in every part of her life in India. Without him, she probably would have experienced greater difficulties. He was a reliable intermediary, their growing personal relationship reinforcing their professional exchanges. This is evident in their correspondence, where personal passages intertwine with professional information. It is difficult to qualify their formal or professional relationship as egalitarian since Montu, most of the time, was executing Alice's demands. Nevertheless, his access to local people and sources were precious for Alice's work and she consulted with him on many subjects. His action in various fields of expertise shows his agency and his mobilisation as an active—and not passive—party in this encounter.

We can see, specifically in her diaries, that Alice battled with many doubts about her art and struggled with questions about her creative process. Montu was precious support for her in these circumstances, encouraging her and always looking positively at her artistic work.

April 7, 1937. Banaras. I showed Montu photographs of my long forgotten sculptures. The result was unexpected. He was captivated by them and said that therein lay my strength. He couldn't overcome the fact that I was capable of this and that I gave it up, asked how it could be possible, what could be the reason, and said that I should take it up again immediately.<sup>49</sup>

She was not expecting a critical and argued point of view on her art, but Montu gave her something else, equally as valuable. He gave her strength, confidence, and the courage to pursue her quest. It continued over time, as in 1949 when she was working on her Vishvarupa:

March 12, 1949. Banaras. [. . .] When I woke up today after a long, good sleep I decided to tell Montu objectively on Sunday about my art dilemmas. But how should he be able to understand such complications. No, I have to find clarity on my own.

But finally, three days later, she decided to ask his opinion:

April 12, 1949. Banaras. On Holi day, i.e., on March 15, I began the conversion of the Vishvarupa picture into colour. At that time, when the weather was already quite warm, I asked Montu whether I should still start with it or rather postpone it. Surprised, he asked: Why not? And today, after a month, more has been achieved than I had ventured to hope. The composition has received body and life, and the basic colour is already there. It went sur-

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<sup>49</sup> Alice Boner *Diaries*, 242.

prisingly quickly and easily, after the many problems of this winter. Now I am suddenly full of joy and confidence, and often quite fascinated by the picture.<sup>50</sup>

He gave her silent but strong support to go on.

On more concrete aspects, Montu was an administrative support, an intermediary in Alice's network, a research assistant, and an advisor in art buying. This meant that he participated actively in the peripheral and preliminary aspects of her work as a scholar and that he was included in the decisions Alice took as an Indian art collector. He was also learning Sanskrit with her.<sup>51</sup> The archives show that Montu was involved in Alice's personal papers, specifically regarding Indian administration, and that he was charged with taking care of the Assi Ghat house when she was away.<sup>52</sup> He was frequently asked to organise meetings and be the intermediary between Alice and one or other person she wanted to meet, also being part of the discussion. He was himself much involved in mundane life, in the company of Alice but also alone, as for example when he was invited to go to Nepal to see the royal coronation<sup>53</sup> or when he travelled without Alice in Great Britain.<sup>54</sup> In 1964, planning her legacy, Alice asked Montu to be the executor of her affairs in India.<sup>55</sup> He was also involved in the "*Citraśāstra* affair",<sup>56</sup> a palm-leaf manuscript published by Alice Boner and Pandit Sadasiva Rath Sarma<sup>57</sup>—a figure of the Revivalist Movement in Orissa—soon dogged by allegations of inauthenticity.<sup>58</sup> Alice was very worried about this affair and shared her concerns with Montu in several letters. The letters indicate that questions over the manuscript's authenticity had already been debated in 1963, three years before Boner and Sarma's publication.

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50 *Alice Boner Diaries*, 277, 278.

51 See letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mitra, 4 May 1956, Almora. Also letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mitra, 17 September 1953, Davos-Platz.

52 Kuratli/Beltz 2014: 30.

53 See letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mitra, 16 April 1956, Almora.

54 See letter from Promoda Charan Mitra to Alice Boner, 9 August 1939, 29 Belsize Park, Hampstead, London. Alice and Montu were together in Europe, in Paris. But Montu then left for London and Alice for Ascona before they met again in Vienna before returning to India. Alice teased Montu about being on his own in London: "I hope your journey was quite pleasant and you have accustomed yourself to the new situation—of standing alone in the big, big world!" Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mitra, 2 August 1939, Paris.

55 See letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mitra, 3 August 1964, Almora. Also letter from Promoda Charan Mitra to Alice Boner, 9 August 1964, 29 Ramapura, Varanasi.

56 On this affair and the manuscript, see Fischer/Pathy 2020.

57 Boner et al. 1966.

58 Fischer/Pathy 2020: 79.

Alice Boner (1889–1981) and Promoda Charan Mittra (1901–1976)

My worries about the nasty rumours spread in India that our manuscripts are fakes I told you already.<sup>59</sup>

The nasty rumours about our manuscripts has [*sic*] become a rather serious affair. Brill, who first did not seem alarmed, has now become afraid and wants some tests and proofs that they are genuine. I have tried my best, but for testing chemically the palm-leaves they are too young. They cannot test anything below 500 years of age!<sup>60</sup>

Montu tells her, like the lawyer he is, to let the other prove falsehood first before looking for proof of authenticity.<sup>61</sup> In the same affair, he was then consulted on the trust Alice wanted to found to cover her expenses for “this research work with Pandit, travels, manuscripts, pandits, copyists, photographers, typists, etc.”<sup>62</sup>

As mentioned, Montu was also involved in Alice’s research. She would ask him to copy out passages from books in his letters when she did not have the book with her. He was also asked to contact pandits able to resolve Alice’s queries:

I would like you to solve for us a problem which has cropped up in connection with one of Dr. Jung’s books. In this book he analyses some Mandalas which contain Swastikas, and he gives a different interpretation according to the side to which it is turning. This is perfectly all right. But he considers the Swastika turning to the right as so:

卐 and to the left as so: 卐

while I feel that just the contrary is the case. Would you be able to find out from an authoritative pandit, which of the two Swastikas is considered the right one in India? For me there was never any doubt about this question, till I found this opinion of Mr. Jung, which is quite contrary.<sup>63</sup>

We have many references in the correspondence in which Promoda Charan Mittra was working as an intermediary and responsible for finding people able to resolve Alice’s research problems or help in the understanding of texts or ideas.

Finally, Alice Boner was also a patron and art collector. Over the years she built up a beautiful collection of Indian art works (sculptures, bronzes, musical instruments, etc.), among which was a very valuable collection of miniature paintings.<sup>64</sup> In this undertaking, too, she relied on Montu’s advice, and she did not take a decision before first getting his opinion:

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59 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mittra, 16 June 1963, Basel.

60 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mittra, 11 July 1963, Chianti.

61 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mittra, 15 August 1963, Davos.

62 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mittra, 6 September 1965, Zürich.

63 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mittra, 17 September 1953, Davos-Platz.

64 Kuratli/Beltz 2014: 43.

Kapoor has suddenly turned up and brought a rather extraordinary Mogul painting which I would like you to see. Please come as soon as you can. Kapoor said he would come at 5 pm. for my decision. It is rather a big bite. Can you come before him? If not I shall try to postpone decision by one day.<sup>65</sup>

All these examples show Promoda Charan Mittra's involvement in Alice Boner's professional activity in India and the multiple skills he possessed and put at her service, yet all from an intimate and trusting personal relationship.

## Conclusion: Including oneself in history

The study of the encounter between Alice Boner and Promoda Charan Mittra adds a dimension to the Swiss artist and scholar. On the one hand, the analysis of this intimate and significant relationship helps us comprehend Alice Boner's understanding of India and its manifestations in her art and thought. On the other hand, it places Promoda Charan Mittra in the scope of the twentieth-century history as being a part of the exchanges between Europe and India. But it shows also that this encounter, simultaneously intertwined in an intimate relationship and embedded in global history, is not unilateral and that it is possible to trace both parts. As Sanjay Subrahmanyam underlines: "Every encounter obviously requires at least two parties. Yet, there can be no assurance that the two will be equally present at the meetings, or that their voices can be equally heard or recovered by later investigators."<sup>66</sup> Indeed no such assurance was self-evident as we began our case study. But we have seen in the examples discussed above that a reconstruction in which both parties are equally present is possible when including all the sources at our disposal. Moreover, in this encounter we found that both parts were active: two worlds, two personalities, one symmetrical meeting—to invoke Romain Bertrand's "*histoire à parts égales*". Even though at first glance—owing to the scholarship available on Alice Boner and maybe also to her strong character (evident both in the correspondence and in the way she led her life)—this is not immediately obvious, we have shown that Montu was an active agent in a myriad of ways. First, in the portraits, Montu finds it difficult to pose for Alice. Tempting as it would be to dismiss this episode, it is reasonable to read it as Montu's reaction to or discomfort with Alice's (orientalising) gaze. The second way is in Montu's engagement in Alice's artistic work and social and professional networks. This part of their relationship is not only based on Alice's demands and circle but also on Mittra's full awareness of how indispensable he

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65 Letter from Alice Boner to Promoda Charan Mittra, 27 April 1949, place missing.

66 Subrahmanyam 2017: 289–290.



was and how he could be embedded in this network made up primarily of European and Indian intellectuals.

Moreover, what is interesting in this case is how both Alice Boner and Promoda Charan Mittra consciously thought about their legacy and their place in the future reconstruction of history. On the one hand, Montu, well aware of Alice's social status and involvement in the art world, carefully retained all her letters over forty years, which were then given to Alice after his death in 1976. On the other hand, Alice, at the end of her life, gifted to the Museum Rietberg not only her art collection, art work, and professional notes but also her private writings and correspondence, including the letters lovingly preserved by Montu. She perfectly knew that in these private archives, Montu was taking a central place. These two correlated actions from Montu and Alice are a synonym for the certitude they both felt that all the voices should be heard.

This is the first time in thirty years that I am actually living in your house. In the past years I lived one or two days sometimes. This time I made up my mind to stay for a month and so I came to your place straight from the station. It is now ten days that I am in your house. I did not realise before, although I have been coming to this house for the last 30 years that Ganga could be like a living personality and this is the reason why Ganga is called mother.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Letter from Promoda Charan Mittra to Alice Boner, 1 September 1965, Assi Sangam Varanasi.

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