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## ***NAGAS: HIDDEN HILL PEOPLE OF INDIA ON VIEW AT THE RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART***

***Photographs by Pablo Bartholomew offer an intimate look at little-known Indian hill tribes***

New York—Indian photojournalist Pablo Bartholomew (b. 1955) grew up hearing stories of Naga tribes from his father, who fled persecution by the invading Japanese forces in his native Burma (present-day Myanmar) to India during World War II and encountered Burmese Nagas along the way. Bartholomew’s father related tales of the Nagas’ hospitality and kindness, planting a seed of curiosity in his son’s mind that would finally bear fruit in 1989 when Bartholomew began what he calls a “visual anthropological project,” photographing Naga tribes over a period of nearly ten years. Despite the danger posed by low-level warfare between the Indian army and secessionist groups along his path to the Naga hills, Bartholomew describes his trips there as “an escape...where phones didn’t work, there were no faxes, and just the hill tribes and people of the valleys.”

Originally a district of the state of Assam, Nagaland gained its independence in 1963. Occupying India’s northeastern corner, Nagaland is bordered on the east by Myanmar, on the south by Manipur, and on the west and northwest by Assam. “Nagas” is a term used to describe the more

than thirty tribes that reside in these Indian hills. There is no common language—English is the official language of the state and is used, along with Hindi, for communication between tribes—but rather sixty spoken dialects. While Naga cultures share many traits, each is distinct. Indeed, Naga author Ayinla Shilu Ao states that “every tribe could virtually be a nation unto itself.”

While some aspects of the Nagas’ animistic religious traditions remain, two-thirds of Nagas are Christians, reflecting the strong, influential presence of Baptist missionaries beginning in the late 1800s, who encouraged a complete break from many Naga traditions. Headhunting was once a custom central to all Naga tribes: warring tribes would use their enemies’ heads in religious ceremonies, particularly fertility rites. Headhunting was eventually banned by the ruling British in the 1930s, but megaliths, which were erected each time a head was taken to symbolize martial power and virility, still stand in Naga villages.

*Nagas: Hidden Hill People of India*, on view March 13—September 21, 2009, features twenty-four color photographs that document the fascinating fusion of Naga tradition and modernity. Many photographs depict men wearing traditional, intricately adorned headdresses or necklaces of skulls replicated in metal—each one symbolizing a head taken during a raid—and whose faces bear the marks of elaborate ritual tattoos. Others exemplify the influence of Western culture such as a photograph of flower girls attending a Baptist wedding or models in Western-style dress applying makeup. Many of the photographs are reflective of the way Ao describes Nagas: “A people who went from living in a near Neolithic stage to the modern 20<sup>th</sup> century in one lifetime.”

### **Sponsorship**

*Nagas: Hidden Hill People of India* is sponsored, in part, by Air India.



### **About RMA**

RMA holds one of the world’s most important collections of Himalayan art. Paintings, pictorial textiles, and sculpture are drawn from cultures that touch upon the arc of mountains that extends from Afghanistan in the northwest to Myanmar (Burma) in the southeast and includes Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, and Bhutan. The larger Himalayan cultural sphere, determined by significant cultural exchange over millennia, includes Iran, India, China, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. This rich cultural legacy, largely unfamiliar to Western viewers, offers an uncommon opportunity for visual adventure and aesthetic discovery.

Admission to RMA is \$10 for adults; \$7 for seniors, middle- and high-school students, and artists (with ID); \$2 for college students (with ID); \$7 for neighbors (zip codes 10011 & 10001 with ID); free for seniors the first Monday of every month; and free for children under 12 and for museum members. Gallery admission is free to all on Fridays between 7 pm and 10 pm.

Open Monday 11 am to 5 pm, Wednesday 11 am to 7 pm, Thursday 11 am to 5 pm, Friday 11 am to 10 pm, Saturday and Sunday from 11 am to 6 pm; closed on Tuesday. To reach the museum by subway, visitors may take the A, C or E to 14th Street; the 1 to 18th Street; 1, 2, 3 to 14th Street; F and V to 14th Street; N, R, Q, W, 4, 5 and 6 to 14th or the L to 6th Avenue. By bus, visitors may take the B20 to the corner of 7th Avenue and 17th Street.