

Art of South Asia (before ca. A.D. 1500)

Content

Religious images dominate the surviving art of the great periods of South Asian sculpture, from the second century B.C. to about A.D. 1500. What remains are stone temples, stone and metal temple sculpture, and smaller religious sculpture created for personal worship. Like much ancient sculpture—for instance, Greek and medieval European—many of these images were probably originally painted. A few retain original gilt surfaces and inlaid gems. The walls of sacred structures were also sometimes enriched with mural painting and textiles.

“Surviving” is a key word because not all art created in this time span was religious. Archaeological excavations have proven the existence of many palaces that were constructed in brick and wood. As described in literature, the interiors were decorated with richly carved wood and murals depicting courtly life. One can only imagine the opulent colors, the lavish royal jewelry made of precious stones set in gold, and the luxurious costumes of silk and diaphanous cotton for which India has been famous in the West since ancient Roman times. The details of costume and adornment found on the sculpture and paintings of Hindu and Buddhist deities give some idea of this splendid finery. Much more Indian art from the last four hundred years has survived, providing a more complete picture of the rich secular arts of India. This sumptuous later royal art is described on pages 36–37.

The Ideal

Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain deities are depicted in ideal human forms to symbolize their transcendent and divine natures. Other civilizations—such as the Greek, Egyptian, and sub-Saharan African peoples—have also used ideal human forms to visualize beliefs about divinity, moral behavior, and beauty. A comparison of their creations with South and Southeast Asian images (and with images from our own culture) shows that how the ideal human body is portrayed depends upon the beliefs of the culture in which the art is made.

Metaphors from Nature

Artists created ideal human forms by using a vocabulary of metaphors derived from nature. This vocabulary was codified during the Gupta period (mid-4th–6th century), and artists worked from this repertory to make their images. Eyes were to be shaped like the curve of a little fish or a lotus petal, eyebrows like an archer’s bow, lips like lotus blossoms, the chin like a mango stone, and arms like an elephant’s trunk—or, in the case of a woman’s arms, long and tapering like a perfectly formed edible root. The male torso should resemble the frontal view of a bull’s head or the chest of a lion, and the female torso should be shaped like a narrow-waisted drum (called a *damaru*). Often Buddhist and Hindu deities, male and female, are depicted with three rings around the neck, a symbol of beauty and good fortune. They are a metaphor for the three folds at the opening of the conch

shell. The genius of the Indian artist was the melding of these disparate quotations from nature into ideal bodies that are at once human and transcendent—appropriate vessels for gods and spiritual beings.

Identification of Hindu and Buddhist Deities

In Indian art, worshippers recognize images of an individual deity or spiritual being by the particular attributes he or she holds, and by the deity's pose, gestures, color, and adornment. Certain symbols are common in the iconography of all three religions.

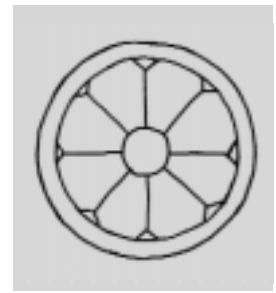
The Lotus. The Indian symbol par excellence is the lotus, sign of spiritual perfection. As its flower rises unsullied from the muddy waters and blooms to the sun, so the devotee attempts to rise above the impure, illusory world and become transformed through enlightenment into a spiritually perfected being. The lotus appears in art both as a complete blossom and as stylized petals that form the pedestal upon which spiritual beings sit or stand.



lotus



lotus pedestal



wheel

The Wheel (chakra) is another symbol with several layers of meaning. It represents the doctrine preached by the Buddha in his first sermon after attaining enlightenment. The words he spoke are called “turning the wheel of the law.” In Hindu thought, the wheel symbolizes time and the cycles of creation and destruction that form successive universes. It is also one of Vishnu’s attributes, where it functions as a weapon in the form of a discus.

The halo or nimbus of light frequently surrounds the heads of deities, particularly Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and often envelops their entire body to signify transcendent radiance. It is thought that this luminous symbol originated somewhere in western or Central Asia and spread eastward to India by the second century A.D. and westward by the fourth century, when it appears in Christian art to signify spirituality. Halos also appear in Hindu sculptures and were later adopted by the Mughal and Rajput aristocracy in their portraits.

image 2, 3

Adornment. Hindu deities and bodhisattvas wear the lavish jewelry and elaborate hairstyles of Indian royalty (image 2 and 3) as well as the “sacred thread,” a symbol of learning and the transition to adulthood worn by the upper castes. It crosses the left shoulder and falls in a curve across the torso and around the right hip.

Multiple Features. One of the most striking features of Hindu and Buddhist art is the portrayal of multiarmed and occasionally multiheaded gods. These images express the multiple powers and responsibilities of the gods. The several hands were needed to display the deity's attributes and to make gestures that symbolize concepts associated with the deity. Because the attributes, gestures, and physical form of each god are distinct, worshippers can identify each god by these features.

Expressions. Although the majority of sculptural figures are idealized and sublime, occasionally they are ugly and horrific. To the Hindu and Buddhist faithful, these wrathful deities are protective because their terrifying energies are directed against evil and ignorance. In Esoteric Buddhist thought, they represent human failings such as greed, hatred, and ignorance which one must recognize and overcome on the path to enlightenment. Often Hindu and Buddhist gods are depicted as serene in one guise and wrathful in another. Such contrasts reflect the Indian belief that dualities in our world are only an illusion. Seemingly opposite forces are merely aspects of the same ultimate reality.

Poses. Many poses commonly found in art—such as the lotus position—are drawn from yoga which, according to myth, was practiced by the gods. Another source for poses and gestures in South Asian sculpture is classical dance, which evolved in Hindu temple ritual and in performances at royal courts. With a visual vocabulary of particular movements and gestures well known to their audience, dancers acted out the adventures of the gods and heroes of India's great epics. Contemporary dance performances in the traditional style have been revived by following descriptions in ancient texts on dance, called the *Natyashastras*, and also by studying the poses of figures in temple sculpture and wall reliefs.

The most common poses in art are:

- An iconic frontal pose (*samabhanga*) with both feet equally supporting the weight or with one knee very slightly bent.
- A swaying pose with the weight on one leg, the head and lower body slanting in one direction, and the torso moving in the opposite direction. This thrice-bent (*tribhanga*) pose suggests potential movement.
- The seated meditation pose derived from yoga commonly known as the lotus position (*padmasana*) in which the legs are crossed with feet upturned.
- The seated pose of royal ease (*lalitasana*) in which one leg is folded so that the foot rests on the seat and the other leg hangs down.
- A dancing pose in which all the weight rests on one leg.
- An active standing pose in which a deity tramples upon a demon; one leg is bent, the other is stretched out at an angle.

Architectural Decoration. Sacred Hindu and Buddhist architecture is decorated with flora, fauna, mythical creatures, and human forms. Carvings of fantastic, powerful animals signify protection. Patterns of flowers, trees, vines, figures of *yakshas* and *yakshis*, loving couples, and sensuous women (image 23) allude to fertility, abundance, and the generative powers of the divine. Mural paintings survive in some sacred sites and rich textiles may also have adorned the walls.

image 23

Symbols and Attributes in Buddhist Art

The Buddha

Early Buddhist art did not show the Buddha in human form. In relief sculptures at early stupa sites, his presence is indicated by symbols such as the lotus (signifying purity), the eight-spoked wheel (emblem of the Buddha's law), the parasol (ancient symbol of royalty), and a footprint (the Buddha's presence). It may be that this symbolic way of representing the Buddha arose from the view that with enlightenment he had transcended human form. Not until the first century A.D., more than five hundred years after his death, do images of the Buddha in human form begin to appear. Perhaps these figures were a response to emerging beliefs that the Buddha was not only a great spiritual teacher but also a savior god who, with personal devotion, could help others achieve nirvana.

Figures of the Buddha have particular features, called *lakshanas*, which express his exalted state as the Enlightened One. The bulge at the top of his head—the *ushnisha*—signifies his transcendent knowledge. The *urna*, a whorl of hair between the eyebrows that can also be depicted as a dot, is another symbol of his transcendent nature; its placement corresponds to that of the pineal gland. The Buddha's webbed hands and feet are also *lakshanas*.

Images of the Buddha have other distinguishing marks. His earlobes are elongated from wearing heavy gold earrings when he was a prince. After gaining enlightenment, he discarded such adornments, which represented attachment to the physical world. Princes traditionally had long hair piled up in an elaborate coiffure. When the Buddha became an ascetic, he cut his hair short as a sign of renunciation and humility; in visual art, it is often shown curled in tight snail-like whorls.

The Buddha wears the simple garments of a monk: an undergarment, robe, and sometimes a shawl. His serene expression and half-closed eyes signify meditation and inner peace. His eyes are also half-open to show awareness and compassion for the devotee. Often his lips reveal the hint of a smile, another sign of compassion (image 6 and poster A). Wheels, emblems of Buddhist law, or stylized lotus blossoms are often inscribed on his palms and the soles of his feet.

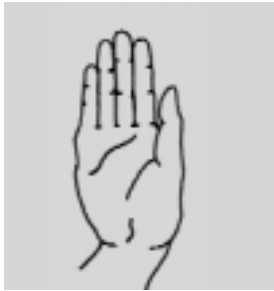
image 6; poster A

image 41

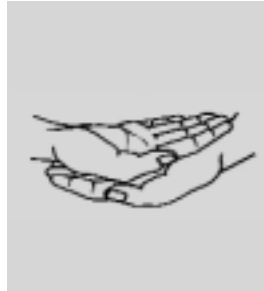
Events from the *Jatakas* were popular subjects in relief sculpture (image 41). These were folk tales written down after the Buddha's death describing the animal and human forms he had taken in his 550 past lifetimes on his journey to enlightenment.

Hand Gestures

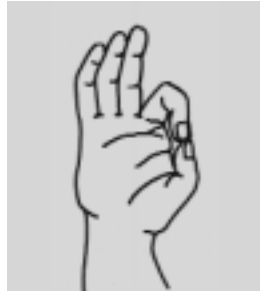
The elongated fingers of the Buddha's hands emphasize his gestures (mudras), which convey meaning to his worshippers. The most common gestures are illustrated below, along with their meaning:



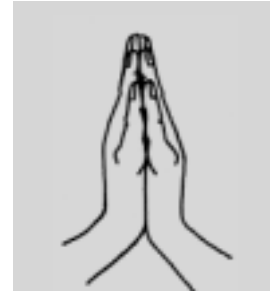
allaying gesture



meditation



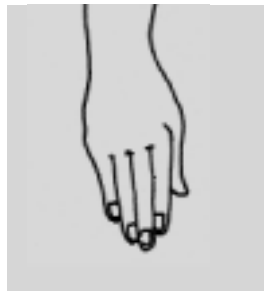
teaching



prayer



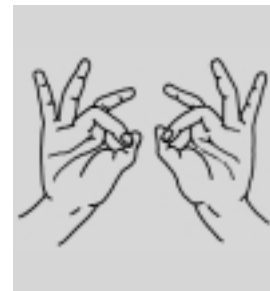
bestowing



**calling the earth to witness
(signifying the Buddha's
right to enlightenment)**



**teaching the law or turning
the wheel of the law**



discussion

Bodhisattvas

Bodhisattvas are beings who have reached enlightenment but elect to stay on earth to help others attain "release." Thus, they are intermediaries that aid in humankind's enlightenment. Bodhisattvas are identified by their princely dress and adornment (image 4, 10, and 12). As spiritual princes, they have earned regalia of the highest order. Individual bodhisattvas are identified by the gestures they make, the attributes they hold, their color, and in some cases symbolic elements in their headdresses.

image 4, 10, 12

Esoteric Buddhist Deities

Esoteric (Tantric) Buddhism expanded the pantheon of deities, both male and female. They are identified by a variety of hand gestures, body positions, and skin color. Many are depicted with multiple arms and hands to show their diverse powers, and may have more than one face. Esoteric deities may have animal mounts or vehicles, as Hindu gods do, to carry them through the universe. These new deities include the cosmic Buddhas, Buddhas of past ages, and personified aspects of the most important bodhisattvas portrayed in pacific or wrathful forms (image 10, 12, 13, and 14).

image 10, 12, 13, 14

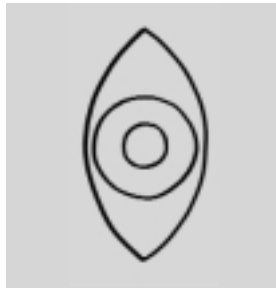
Identification of the Hindu Gods

Like Buddhist deities, Hindu gods are identified by the attributes they hold, their attendants, their color, and their adornment. Many wear the lavish jewelry and elaborate hairstyles of Indian royalty, and most wear the “sacred thread.” (Bodhisattvas are also sometimes depicted wearing the sacred thread.) Often male gods have female goddess consorts, and most gods and goddesses have an animal or a bird (called vehicles or mounts) upon which they travel about the universe. The deities described here are among the most important in the Hindu pantheon and their images are the ones most frequently encountered in the Metropolitan Museum galleries.

Shiva

image 17, 21, 22, 36

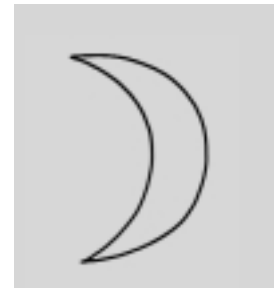
Shiva has many roles and guises, each identified by particular attributes and poses (image 17, 21, 22, and 36). He is sometimes depicted with two arms but more frequently four, and he often carries a trident. In the center of his forehead is a third eye, shown vertically. His hairlocks, long and matted from his ascetic practices, are piled up in a tall chignon. Some of Shiva’s most common attributes are:



the third eye, indicating divine omniscience



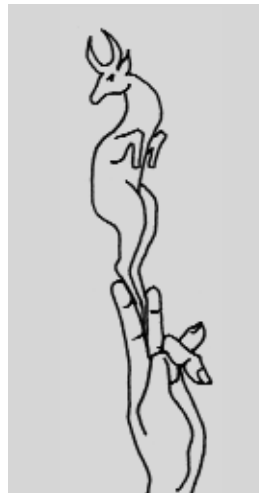
damaru, a hand drum, indicating the primordial sound of creation



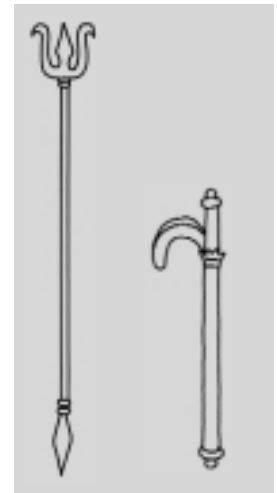
a crescent moon in his hair, representing the cyclical nature of time



agni, the consuming fire of destruction



an antelope, representing animal fertility (Shiva is lord of the animals)



a trident and battle ax, symbols of Shiva’s militance

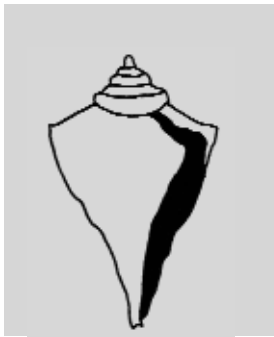
Vishnu

image 16, 20, 46

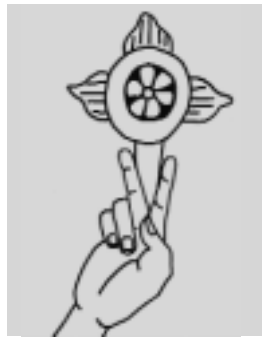
Vishnu is usually depicted with four arms (image 16, 20, and 46) and wears a tall conical crown. Typically, one of his hands makes the fear-allaying gesture. His animal mount is Garuda, a man-bird and ancient solar symbol of power. In Vishnu's nine previous avatars, he appeared as a fish, tortoise, boar, man-lion, dwarf, the ax-bearer Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, and the Buddha. Vishnu's tenth appearance, yet to come, will be Kalki. His two most popular avatars are Krishna (image 15, 25, 29, 30, and 48) and Rama (image 38), both of whom, like Vishnu, are portrayed with dark blue-gray colored skin.

image 15, 25, 29, 30, 48
image 38

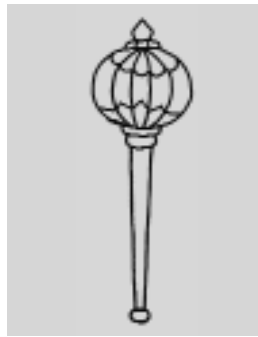
Vishnu's usual attributes are:



The conch shell, a war trumpet which in spiral form symbolizes the origin of existence



The war discus, a wheel-shaped weapon with a sharp cutting edge



A club or mace, symbol of authority and the power of knowledge



The lotus, symbol of transcendence and purity

The Great Goddess

Devi, the Great Goddess, appears in myriad forms. As Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and beauty, she is one of the most popular deities in India and is sometimes shown flanked by two elephants who honor her by pouring water over her head with their trunks. Devi, in the form of Lakshmi, is Vishnu's wife. Devi also appears as Vishnu's wife in two of his incarnations: when he is Rama she is Sita, and when he is Krishna she is Radha.

image 18, 21, 36, 49

Parvati (image 18, 21, 36, and 49) is another form of Devi. In Hindu mythology, she is the reincarnation of Shiva's first wife Sati, who killed herself because of an insult to her husband. (The traditional custom, now outlawed, in which a Hindu widow throws herself upon her husband's funeral pyre is called suttee, a word derived from Sati. As the name implies, suttee recreates Sati's final act of loyalty and devotion to her husband.) Beautiful Parvati was born to lure the mourning Shiva into another marriage, thus taking him away from the life of the ascetic into the more active realm of husband and father. Like Lakshmi, Parvati represents the ideal wife and mother. She is portrayed as a perfect balance between purity and sensuality.

image 24

The militant Durga (image 24), another incarnation of Devi, was created by the gods to kill a demon that the male gods, even combining their powers, could not vanquish. Durga holds in her multiple hands the weapons lent to

her by the gods; for instance, Shiva's trident and Vishnu's war disk. She also holds a sword, bell, and rhyton (drinking vessel) shaped like a ram for drinking the blood of demons she has killed. Despite her awesome powers, when she kills the demon Mahisha, her face is serene and beautiful and her body is the female ideal.

image 19

Violent, ferocious images of the goddesses Chamunda (image 19) and Kali symbolize the darker side of the Great Goddess, who in these forms kills demons, repels evil, defeats ignorance, and protects the devotee and the temple.

Ganesha

image 26

With his elephant head and chubby, childlike body, Ganesha is the most beloved of all Hindu deities (image 26). He is the remover of all obstacles and so is called upon before the start of all kinds of ventures. But Ganesha has a deeper significance, made clear in a Hindu prayer that begins, "Lead us as a tuskier would out of the forest of false ideas to the path of truth." His animal vehicle is the rat, which, though small by contrast, can gnaw through any obstacle. This comparison suggests that there are two ways to remove obstacles: to be like an elephant who tramples everything in its path, or, like the rat, to find a way through small openings to achieve the same goal.

Ganesha is usually shown with four arms. With his trunk he reaches for a bowl of the sweets he so loves and holds a string of prayer beads, an elephant goad, sometimes a snake, and his broken tusk. Sculptures of Ganesha are usually found at the beginning of a sequence of deities on the exterior walls of a Hindu temple, placed there to eliminate obstacles faced by the worshipper in his or her religious quest.

Hanuman

image 38

In the *Ramayana*, Hanuman is the chief minister to the monkey king. Together with the king and his army of monkeys, Hanuman helped Rama battle against Ravana, the evil demon king (image 38) who had abducted Rama's wife Sita. Hanuman was so agile, clever, strong, and loyal to Rama that he symbolizes the ideal of loyalty and service.

The Formal Elements of South Asian Art

Emphasis on Volume

image 4

With the exception of certain areas like the Gandhara region, which was influenced by late Roman art (image 4), the anatomy of figures does not emphasize the internal structure of muscle and bone. Rather, it expresses a body purified of these elements and instead filled with spirituality. As the vessel of *prana*, sacred breath of life, the body seems to swell from within; flesh is rounded and the skin is taut, so that the volumes of the entire body flow smoothly one into another. This conception of *prana* derives from yoga, an ancient method of achieving spiritual insight through control of mind and body. Despite the strong sense of volume in most forms of Indian sculpture, stone figures are rarely portrayed fully in the round. They are actually in very high relief, perhaps because most sculptures were set on the external walls of religious structures and were meant to be seen from only one side.

The sensual female figures in Indian art take their forms from ancient nature goddesses whose full breasts, narrow waists, and generous hips symbolize the abundance of the land and the female's procreative powers. Images of the major male deities have broad shoulders and curving contours with slender waists and powerful thighs, a physique that suggests both power and spirituality. The prana-filled bodies of both males and females in Indian art evoke a serene otherworldliness. This is not surprising, as they are spiritual beings who have passed beyond the actual physicality of the human body.

Measured Proportions

Canons of proportion were devised to create the ideal anatomy. The figure was divided according to the number of *tallas* in its height. A *talla* is a hand span from chin to top of forehead. These canons varied slightly from age to age and region to region. In general, earlier figures tend to be shorter and stockier than later ones.

Scale and Placement

When sculptors and painters depicted groups of figures surrounding the main deity, they used a hierarchy of proportion to clarify each figure's relative spiritual importance (image 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 20, and 39). Even important deities are shown smaller (image 20) if they are not the main gods in the scene. In iconic (rather than narrative) representations, the placement of the figures is balanced by the main deity in the center. Lesser gods, guardian figures, celestial musicians, and dancers often appear as the god's entourage in both Hindu and Buddhist art. Again, size indicates their relative importance and they are placed in less prominent positions flanking the central figure.

**image 8, 10, 11,
13, 14, 20, 39**

Surface Contrasts

On images of bodhisattvas and Hindu deities, intricate details of the head-dress, hair, jewelry, crowns, scarves, garlands, and drapery create pleasing contrasts with the smooth prana-filled flesh.

Color

Indian stone sculpture was probably originally painted, as is modern sculpture on Indian temples. Marble figures, however, were generally left unpainted to preserve the purity of the white stone. Only the eyes were inlaid or colored (image 27). Many bronze statues were gilded. Ancient texts and illustrations on palm leaf (the traditional surface for writing and painting before the Muslim introduction of paper in the thirteenth century) indicate that specific colors were associated with specific deities. When a god had multiple faces, each face often had a distinctive color. Colors were also used symbolically in Buddhist cloth paintings of Nepal and Tibet (image 8, 10, 11, 13, and 14).

image 27

image 8, 10, 11, 13, 14

Functions of South Asian Art

Figural Art

Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain statues and paintings of the gods were created as a focus for worship and meditation. Narrative reliefs illustrating stories about the Buddha or other deities contained an underlying ethical lesson. At another level of meaning, these religious images expressed in visual form complex philosophical concepts about the nature and workings of the universe.

**image 8, 10, 11, 12,
13, 24, 26**

Smaller images were made, perhaps for personal worship and contemplation in monastic or domestic shrines, or as votive offerings (image 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 24, and 26). Most larger Indian sculpture was set into the exterior walls of a sacred structure, to be worshipped by devotees as they circumambulated the exterior. Jain temples, however, were set in walled courtyards and their interiors were covered with sculpture.

The Buddhist Stupa

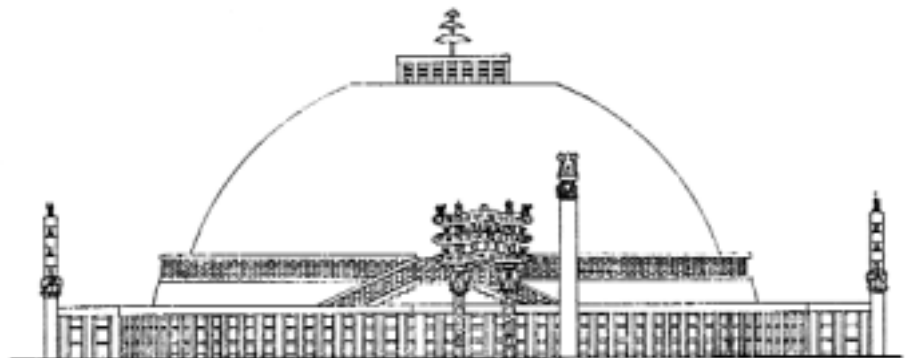
Relics of the Buddha and venerated Buddhist saints were buried inside stupas, hemispherical mounds of earth that were circumambulated by worshippers. In early times, the paths around the stupa were delineated by a stone railing with four gateways oriented to the cardinal directions. Often these railings and gateways were decorated with reliefs depicting the life of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni and his past lives. Pilgrims traveled great distances to be near the holy relic within the stupa and to see the sculptural narratives as they meditated upon the Buddha's teachings. The stupa was topped by a small square structure with a multitiered spire of umbrellas of decreasing size rising from its center. This ensemble may derive from the ancient custom of fenced sacred trees that probably were worshipped as the axis mundi (world axis) or as the abode of a deity. The layered parasol symbolically honors and shelters the relics, just as parasols honor kings in South Asia. In East Asia, the tall spire minus the hemispherical mound developed into the pagoda tower. Small stupas were often incorporated into monastic halls and monasteries.

Model of a Stupa

Pakistan (ancient region of Gandhara). Kushan period, ca. 4th century. Bronze. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald J. Bruckmann, 1985 (1985.387ab)



**a votive model of
a stupa in bronze**

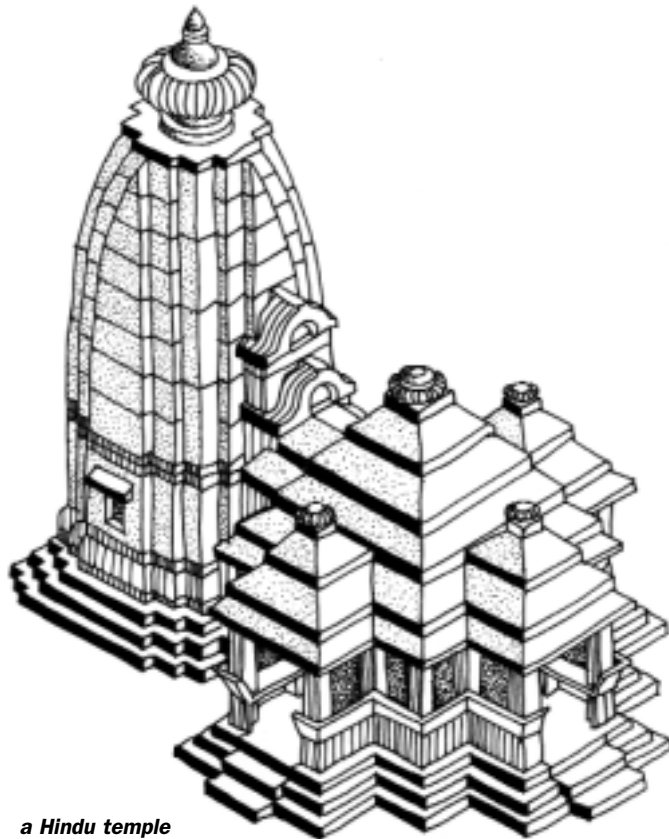


The Great Stupa at Sanchi

Hindu Temples

Hindu temples are themselves objects of worship. Their typical form emulates the cosmic mountain that is the abode of the deity honored and housed in the temple. As the devotee circles the temple exterior in the proscribed direction, he or she worships the various gods portrayed on the walls, particularly the deity honored within. These images are arranged to aid the viewer on the path to spiritual release. Worship is usually individual rather than congregational, and only at times of religious festivals do crowds throng the temple compounds. A porch and gathering chamber lead to the inner sanctum, which lies beneath the central tower of the temple and contains the image of the main deity, usually made of stone.

Hindu worship has several distinctive features. Merit gathered through sight is called *darshan*. Viewing a temple itself accrues merit to the pilgrim who comes to see the god and makes offerings in the hope of receiving divine blessings. Hindus believe that the image of a god contains the actual living god, and that the god can see the devotee and thus bestow blessings upon him or her. Consequently, the eyes of the image are open. The consecration of a deity image includes a ritual to fill the figure with the breath of life (*prana*), followed by the "opening of the eyes" ceremony, in which the carving or painting of the eyes is finished and the eyes are opened with a ritual implement. *Puja*, the offering ritual before the image of a god, involves the other four senses as well. Through the intermediary of a priest, worshippers present flowers, food, and pour libations of water and milk over the image as they ask for its blessings. Mantras are chanted and bells rung.



a Hindu temple

image 18, 22, 25

In South India, copper statues of deities were worshipped both inside and outside the temple. They were equipped with rings and carrying bases so they could be carried in processions on festival days. Like a living king, they could view and be viewed by their followers. Within the temple, statues of deities were bathed, fed, clothed, and entertained by singing and dancing (image 18, 22, and 25). Whether in a temple or a home, daily acts of devotion include waking the image in the morning, washing, dressing, and feeding it. The image is honored as a guest would be. In this way, the devotee develops a close and loving relationship with his or her god. Seeing the image of a god in a Hindu temple is a very different experience from viewing sculpture in a museum gallery: although sculptural figures of the gods are depicted with luxurious jewels and diaphanous garments that fall in delicate folds, in daily pujas they are covered with real clothing and garlands of flowers, and the carved details of the sculpture would be seen only by the priests.

Jain Temples

image 28

image 27

Jain temples have ground plans similar to Hindu temples, with an entrance porch and a central gathering chamber or pavilion (image 28) which opens into a sanctuary containing an image (image 27) of one of the twenty-four *tirthankaras* ("Those who show the path to enlightenment"). A walled courtyard filled with many small shrines dedicated to other Jain saints usually surrounds the temples.