Mr. Raymond Burnier has made and brought to America a really dazzling series of photographs of medieval Indian sculpture, mostly from the sites Khajuraho, Mahoba, and Bhubaneswar. The photographs are of Hindu temples of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, a period considered late in the history of Indian sculpture but one which may be seen on the merit of this exhibition to have been quite wonderful in its own right. It should be approached so. While most of the larger American museums have examples of Indian sculpture (only the Boston Museum has any considerable collection), there has nowhere in these parts been seen anything that can convey to the public the experience of visiting a large Indian temple. Not that this is a life-sized model or a Colonial Exposition, wall-by-wall presentation. On the contrary it is a series of large photographs mostly of single figures or details, but by seeing a large number of them together the observer experiences much the same thing that he does when visiting an actual temple. It is a very exciting and beautiful exhibition indeed.

All this is a powerful visual manifestation of a very old and powerful religion, the beginnings of which were simple, inspired by the common desire of man to understand and to be in tune with the principles that govern the universe. Most religions start simply and rapidly become complicated, so that when their sculptors and painters attempt to put metaphysical concepts into visual terms the eye is often satisfied with the enchantment and fails to inform the mind of the spiritual meaning. It is not necessary to know book or verse on Hinduism to thoroughly enjoy these deities translated into an understandable human form, any more than it is necessary to be a well-tutored Christian to be uplifted by the sculptured representations of the Old and New Testaments which appear on the Gothic cathedrals. It is true that the more one knows about the meaning and history, the more one’s pleasure is increased; we see the wheel and know it is Saint Catherine, the lion and know that it is Saint Jerome, but even without that knowledge we would be aware of something. So with these Hindu deities we may learn to see a thunderbolt and know that it is Shiva, a ram and flames and know that it is Agni, or recognize Yama dancing on a buffalo. The more we know, the greater our interest, but without any such knowledge at all both Gothic cathedrals and Hindu temples are bound to attract our eye. If they attract us into finding out more about their meaning so much the better.

Bhubaneswar is an ancient city of Orissa, near the bay of Bengal, south of Calcutta. It was partly abandoned when the Mahanadi river changed its course a few centuries ago, but it remained a center of pilgrimage and its main temples are still used for worship. The most important of them date from the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Khajuraho was the capital of an important kingdom in the center of India during the tenth century, a city of large avenues lined with sumptuous temples. Today about ten temples remain standing over a wide area covered with fields and jungle.

The illustrations shown here are from Medieval Indian Sculpture, the current exhibition of photographs by Raymond Burnier, presented under the patronage of the Government of India. Mr. Burnier, who has traveled extensively in India photographing Hindu temple sculpture, is Honorary Officer on Special Duty of the Archaeological Department of the Government of India.
Like the Hindu temple itself each sculpture is built upon a diagram, and very strict canons regulate all the proportions of each figure, the canons being different for the representation of different kinds of deities. Every detail, even the size of the pupils or the breadth of the nostrils is given in the canons. The unit of measure for the whole temple is generally the finger breadth of the architect or that of the donor. Most of the canons are still available in the Sanskrit treatises on architecture and sculpture, very few of which have so far been translated into Western languages. These canons give a strange life to Hindu sculpture. They aim at creating ideal, entirely harmonious types in which the proportion of every limb, the rhythm of every gesture conveys one given feeling, one given idea, achieving relations very much like those on which chords of music are built.

The temple, which is generally raised on a high platform, consists of three parts: the sanctuary, a small, dark, undecorated room containing the image or symbol of the deity to whom the temple is dedicated; the hall, usually built around a central corbel vault of elaborate design which rests on massive pillars; and the porch, to which steps ascend. The walls of every part of the temple inside and outside are covered with sculptures and ornamentation. Each element of the temple being meaningful, there cannot be any blank, meaningless wall.
ABOVE: Head of an apsaras. Kali Temple, Khajuraho. X century. OPPOSITE PAGE: Apsaras with a mirror. Adinath Temple, Khajuraho. X century. The Apsaras were in Hindu mythology the beautiful maidens of India’s heaven. They are much in evidence in both Hindu and Buddhist painting and sculpture. In India they are represented as young persons of a beauty that might be described as luscious—in China as they tear through the air with flying draperies they are often mistaken for angels. Photographs Raymond Burnier—Copyright Pierre Beres
ABOVE: Shardula, one of the fantastic lions that represent the power of nature. Rajarani Temple, Bhuvaneshwar. XII century. OPPOSITE PAGE: Yama's Buffalo. Rajarani Temple, Bhuvaneshwar. XII century. Yama, the Lord of Death, rides on a buffalo. He presides over judgment and punishment—"a vague but effective figure" personifying "the inflexible powers that summon the living to the other world.... When a sinner dies he is led before King Yama, who asks him if he never saw the three messengers of the gods sent as warnings to mortals.... [He]... admits that he saw but did not reflect, and Yama sentences him to punishment, until suffering commensurate to his sins has been inflicted." Photographs Raymond Burnier—Copyright Pierre Beres