

Understanding Hinduism and Hindu Art

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Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art

According to the Hindu view, there are four goals of life on earth, and each human being should aspire to all four. Everyone should aim for *dharma*, or righteous living; *artha*, or wealth acquired through the pursuit of a profession; *kama*, or human and sexual love; and finally *moksha*, or spiritual salvation.

This holistic view is reflected as well in the artistic production of India. Although a Hindu temple is dedicated to the glory of a deity and is aimed at helping the devotee toward *moksha*, its walls might justifiably contain sculptures that reflect the other three goals of life. It is in such a context that we may best understand the many sensuous and apparently secular themes that decorate the walls of Indian temples.

Hinduism is a religion that had no single founder, no single spokesman, no single prophet. Its origins are mixed and complex. One strand can be traced back to the sacred Sanskrit literature of the Aryans, the Vedas, which consist of hymns in praise of deities who were often personifications of the natural elements. Another strand drew on the beliefs prevalent among groups of indigenous peoples, especially the faith in the power of the mother goddess and in the efficacy of fertility symbols. Hinduism, in a form comparable to its present-day expression, emerged at about the start of the Christian era, with an emphasis on the supremacy of the god Vishnu, the god Shiva, and the goddess Shakti (literally, "Power").

The pluralism evident in Hinduism, as well as its acceptance of the existence of several deities, is often puzzling to non-Hindus. Hindus suggest that one may view the Infinite as a diamond of innumerable facets. One or another facet—be it Rama, Krishna, or Ganesha—may beckon an individual believer with irresistible magnetism. By acknowledging the power of an individual facet and

worshiping it, the believer does not thereby deny the existence of other facets. On the contrary, Hindus affirm the existence of many aspects of the Infinite and of varied paths toward the ultimate goal.

Deities are frequently portrayed with multiple arms, especially when they are engaged in combative acts of cosmic consequence that involve destroying powerful forces of evil (**figure 1**). The multiplicity of arms emphasizes the immense power of the deity and his or her ability to perform several feats at the same time. The Indian artist found this a simple and an effective means of expressing the omnipresence and omnipotence of a deity. Demons are frequently portrayed with multiple heads to indicate their superhuman power. The occasional depiction of a deity with more than one head is generally motivated by the desire to portray varying aspects of the character of that deity (**figure 2**). Thus, when the god Shiva is portrayed with a triple head, the central face indicates his essential character and the flanking faces depict his fierce and blissful aspects.



Figure 1



Figure 2

The Hindu Temple

Architecture and sculpture are inextricably linked in India. Thus, if one speaks of Indian architecture without taking note of the lavish sculptured decoration with which monuments are covered, a partial and distorted picture is presented (**figure 3**). In the Hindu temple, large niches in the three exterior walls of the sanctum house sculpted images that portray various aspects of the deity enshrined within. The sanctum image expresses the essence of the deity. For instance, the niches of a temple dedicated to Vishnu may portray his incarnations; those of a temple to Shiva, his various combative feats; and those of a temple to the Great Goddess, her battles with various demons. Regional variations exist, too; in the eastern state of Orissa, for example, the niches of a temple to Shiva customarily contain images of his family – his consort, Parvati, and their sons, Ganesha, the god of overcoming obstacles, and warlike Skanda.



Figure 3

The exterior of the halls and porch are also covered with figural sculpture. A series of niches highlight events from the mythology of the enshrined deity, and frequently a place is set aside for a variety of other gods. In addition, temple walls feature repeated bands of scroll-like foliage, images of women (**figure 4**), and loving couples known as *mithunas* (**figure 5**). Signifying growth, abundance, and prosperity, these were considered auspicious motifs.



Figure 4

Recognizing the Gods

In India the aim of art was never to imitate nature or to create an effect of illusionistic realism; rather, the attempt was to produce an idealized form.

Sculptors did not model their images on living beings: whether it was a god or a human being, a stylized ideal was created.

The model followed for the female torso was the *vajra*, a double-headed divine thunderbolt, or the *damaru*, a waisted drum held by the god Shiva. Following such models specified in ancient texts,

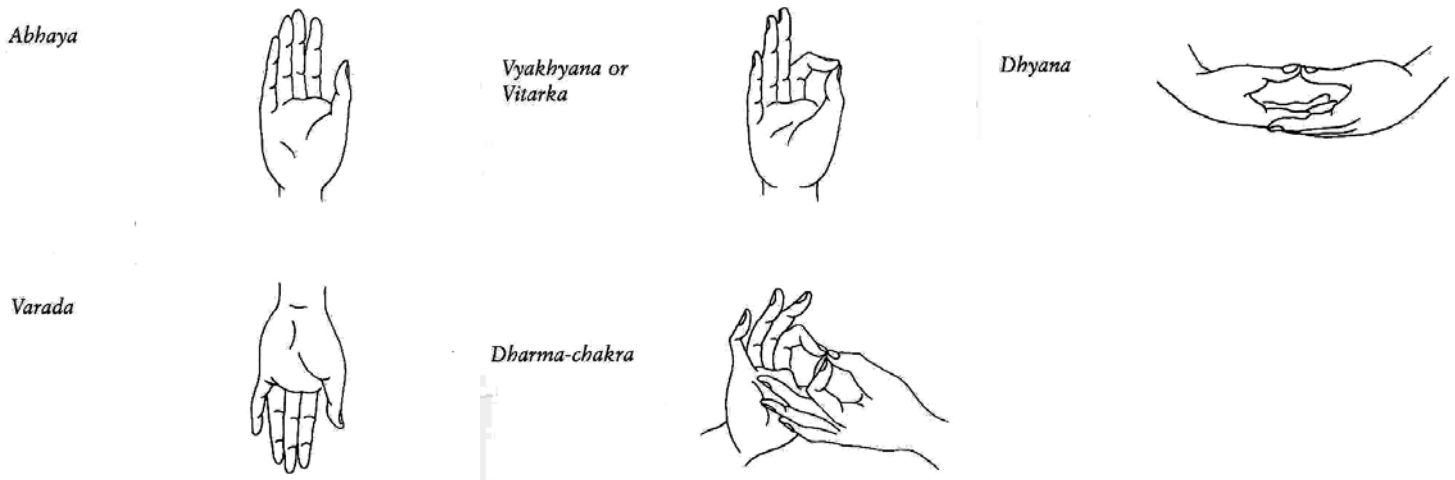
sculptors invariably produced an idealized form with narrow waist, broad hips, and high, rounded breasts. The arms, shapely and elongated, were created to resemble the slender, pliant bamboo shoot. Eyes were modeled on the lotus petal or the fish. No difference is specified for a human as opposed to a divine figure, so that gods and goddesses, as well as ordinary men and women, are all equally sensuous in their portrayal. Following the instructions of ancient texts, artists created images that are closely similar in visualization. Indeed, it is rare for the work of individual sculptors to be distinguishable in the dozens of images carved on a temple wall.

Various hand gestures, known as *mudras*, are used to express the mood and meaning of images of the gods, whether Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist. When the palm is raised to face the worshiper, it is the gesture of protection (*abhaya*). If the hand is lowered and the fingers point downward, the promise is to grant the devotee's wishes (*varada*). When thumb and index finger of the right hand are joined, it is an indication of teaching (*vyakhyana*). In the case of the Buddha, the left hand joins the right to create a two-handed gesture of preaching that is



Figure 5

intended to recall the first sermon (*dharma-chakra*). When a seated image has palms upward and placed within each other in the lap, it is the *mudra* of meditation (*dhyana*). Other *mudras* are specific in their application.



Hindu deities (and also some Buddhist deities) are associated with particular mounts or vehicles (*vahanas*). Thus Shiva rides the bull, the goddess Parvati rides the lion, and Vishnu rides the divine eagle-like Garuda. Each of the many minor deities has his or her own vehicle. An iconography manual will enable a viewer to identify a god as, say, Agni by recognizing his vehicle, the ram. An image on a temple wall may be identified as divine by the presence of a *vahana*; in the case of a human image, no such vehicle is portrayed.

The contrapposto stance, known in India as *tribhanga*, is a popular stance. In this somewhat exaggerated posture, the body has three bends; the head and the lower limbs are angled in the same direction while the torso moves in the opposite angle. *Tribhanga* produces a sense of swaying movement, and most images are thus poised, whether of Shiva, the goddess Shakti, or of men and women who grace the walls of temples. *Samabhanga*, in which the body stands erect in a single alignment, is used for Vishnu and for Jain images.

The deities also take up a variety of seated postures (*asanas*). Meditating gods—the Buddha, the Jinas, Shiva—often sit in a special cross-legged lotus posture (*padmasana*). A number of deities, including Shiva and the goddess Parvati, sit on an elevated seat in a posture of ease known as *lalitasana*, with one leg bent to rest on the seat and the other leg pendent.

Hindu Deities

The Hindu god Vishnu is distinguished by the war discus (*chakra*) and the conch-shell trumpet (*shankha*) that he holds in his hands. Vishnu wears a tall crown and rich jewelry and is often accompanied by his divine consort, Lakshmi, goddess of fortune. A theory of ten incarnations, or *avatars*, is associated with Vishnu, who is believed to have been born on earth on nine occasions; the tenth is yet to come. Most popular among the avatars are Rama, prince of Ayodhya, a model of a warrior-king, hero of the *Ramayana* epic, and Krishna, the cowherd prince, beloved of the cowherd girls of Brindavan and teacher of Arjuna in the famous philosophical poem *Bhagavad Gita*.

The Hindu god Shiva carries a trident; he often has a serpent flung around him as a scarf and wears a skull and the crescent moon in the matted locks piled high upon his head. A third eye in his forehead signifies his all-seeing nature. Renowned as the great dancer, Shiva has



Figure 6: Shiva as Lord of Dance (Nataraja). India (Tamil Nadu), Chola period, c late 11th century. Copper alloy.



Figure 7

the appellation *Nataraja* "Lord of Dance"(figure 6). Shiva is the great practitioner of yoga who spent aeons in meditation until he opened his eyes, saw the goddess Parvati (**figure 7**), and fell in love with her. Parvati, the consort of Shiva, with the lion as her vehicle (*vahana*), is a major deity in her own right. As Durga, she slays demons whom the gods were unable to control. One of her most celebrated feats is the destruction of the buffalo demon, Mahisha. Two other deities are considered their children. Elephant-headed Ganesha is the god who removes obstacles and is worshiped at the start of any undertaking; his vehicle (*vahana*) is the mouse. Skanda, a warlike youth, rides the peacock.

-Vidya Dehejia