

Hindu Art Images and Stories

All of the slide descriptions except for “Shiva Nataraja” were prepared by Molly Schardt, for “Unity and Diversity in the Art of India,” A Teacher Workshop presented by the Education/Outreach Department, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.



Standing Vishnu; Mathura, Northern India, Kushan period, c. 4th century. (right) [Compare with Standing Vishnu, Chola Dynasty, bronze, 10th c., left.]

One of the most important Hindu gods is Vishnu, the Preserver and sustainer of the universe. He is a kingly god and is always shown wearing an elaborate, high crown and heavy jewelry common to royalty. Vishnu also wears a long, fragrant flower garland. In his hands he carries objects which symbolize his powers. The two upper hands hold a conch shell and a lotus seed, while the lower ones hold a discus and a club. Little figures standing in front of these "attributes" are personifications of them—a discus-deity and a club-deity.

This image from Mathura, in the spotted, dark-red sandstone typical of the area, was carved in the late 3rd or early 4th century, at the close of the Kushan period. Besides the fact that it is a Hindu image, there are stylistic aspects of the sculpture that distinguish it from the Kushan period sculpture of Gandhara. This figure is clothed in a thin garment that reveals the body beneath. The belted robe can only be seen at the neck, wrists and legs, but the artist was not interested in the weight and drape of the cloth. He was concerned with the human form revealed beneath it, not as a realistic representation, but simplified into idealized forms.

The Kushans constructed many Buddhist monuments in the area around Mathura in north central India, at the same time as the Gandhara monasteries were being built and decorated. Paralleling these Buddhist monuments, Hindu temples were also being built. As some of the earliest images found display an already established iconography, it is probable that earlier images had been made in perishable materials.



Vaishnavite Shrine; South India, Nayaka period, 16th-17th century (right) [Compare with relief panel (L) on Vishnu Temple at Deogarh, India, 6c]

This ornately carved ivory shrine from southern India is dedicated to the god Vishnu. He is depicted in his reclining form, resting on the great five-headed serpent Sesa ("the durable") dreaming the re-creation of the world after its dissolution at the end of one of the great cosmic cycles. The god is shown with his usual high crown, jewels, and long flower garland. He holds no attributes in his two hands, but the position of his right hand under his head is indicative of this form of Vishnu called Ranganatha who was especially popular in South India during the Nayaka period (16th-17th centuries). Surrounding the central image are several

smaller images of Vishnu holding two of his attributes, the conch and the lotus, in two of his four hands. The most prominent of these images is above the niche, standing between two lovingly modeled elephant heads. Three more images of Vishnu are in the lower panel, and two are around the corner on the sides of the shrine.



As a whole, the shrine represents a South India temple gateway (a *gopuram*), with the roof form, architectural ornaments, and sculptural niches. It appears as a sculpture of a sculpture. Here the god barely fits in the niche provided for him; his

feet push against one side and his crown almost touches the opposite side. There is no room for his consort Lakshmi who usually sits massaging his feet in a wifely gesture of respect and adoration. The two goddesses who appear between Vishnu images in the lower panel may represent the two consorts Lakshmi and Bhumi. A sixth figure in this group, a standing figure with a garland or bouquet of flowers, may be a donor.

Ivory, from the tusks of elephants, was a luxury material that had been used for precious objects at least as early as the 1st century B.C.E. This exceptionally large piece was not only exquisitely carved, but traces of polychrome show that it was originally painted, at least in part, with bright colors.

"Durga Worshipped by the Hindu Triad" Kashmir, North India, Late 19th century

In this little painting from Kashmir in far northern India we meet the full Hindu triad (or Trimurti)—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—the three forms of Brahman, the one ultimate godhead of Hinduism. They are depicted worshipping Durga, one of the forms of the Great Goddess, the feminine spirit as it exists in itself, not as the consort of any god. The three gods stand at the right side of the composition, in balance to the multi-armed image of the goddess who appears floating on a lotus blossom. The setting is minimal; the green ground extends from the bottom to a curved horizon near the top of the page. The whole is surrounded by dotted and floral borders. Kashmir is the northernmost state in India and, therefore, the most removed from the tradition of court painting. This painting is fresh and folk-like in its directness and simplicity.



The gods stand in a simple row, barely overlapping each other. Brahma is first in line, closest to the goddess. He is the Creator, the most senior and regal of the gods. He has four faces in order to see in all of the four directions at once. His four hands are paired and are shown in *anjali mudra*, the gesture of prayer and adoration. Behind him stands Vishnu, the Preserver, blue in color and wearing a crown, jewels, and flower garland. At the right is Shiva, the Destroyer, the ascetic god, shown wearing a tiger skin, and a crescent moon in his piled-up, matted hair. He is fair-skinned because he often coats his body with ashes. The river Ganges is shown as it descended to earth through Shiva's hair.

The scene may illustrate a simple act of worship of the goddess, but it probably also refers to the time when the earth was being ravished by the demon Mahisha, who through prayer and practice had received boons from the gods that made him invulnerable to any and all of them. The earth, the people, and even the minor gods and goddesses were being terrorized by this demon's evil force, so they begged the gods to help. At this the gods gathered to try to come up with a form of power that the demon had not already made himself immune to, that would be able to conquer him. As they concentrated together, the many-armed goddess suddenly appeared floating before them. She requested that they all give her their weapons so she could confront Mahisha with all their separate strengths focused through her being.



Left: Durga Mahishasuramardini (Slayer of the Buffalo Demon Mahisha), Tamil Nadu, South India, Early Chola period, 11th century [Compare with Durga in the act of killing Mahisha in the 15th c. piece from the Indian state of Orissa, right.]

Several iconographic schemes were developed for representing the formidable goddess Durga (the "unassailable," the "unconquerable one") vanquishing the demon Mahisha, from scenes of active combat, to the tranquil state depicted here after the deed had been done. Durga stands with her weight slightly shifted to the left leg which rests upon the head of the buffalo demon, calmly and gracefully showing herself to her worshippers. Zimmer describes her: "she makes herself manifest to the eyes of her devotees in an attitude of almost complete repose, expressing, as it were, her timeless superiority to the demonic self-centered forces that for a brief spell of some millennia have been



disturbing the harmony of the cosmic order." Of the three states of being, the *gunas*, Durga here represents that of *sattva*,

static manifestation or potent beingness. She no longer brandishes the weapons bestowed upon her by the gods; her arms and those attributes are held close to her body, withdrawn from activity.

We can see in her left hands she holds Shiva's trident, Vishnu's discus, a sword, and in the outstretched hand probably a lotus (broken off). In her right hands are Vishnu's conch shell, Vayu's bow, and a shield. A bird perches on her lowered left hand. Durga is regally bedecked in a high crown and heavy earrings.

This is a South Indian image from the late Chola period (c. 13th century). The hard, coarse granite stone is conducive to soft, subtle modeling. The more naturalistic body and elongated forms are representative of southern sculptural style. The image type also is a southern invention where it often appears in a niche on the north side of a temple to indicate victory in the spiritual quest. Durga has been victorious not only over ignorance and self-delusion, but over death itself.

Sarasvati, Goddess Of Learning and Music; South India, 19th-20th century

There are many goddesses in the Indian pantheon. Unlike Durga, most are associated with one or more of the male gods as consort but have a realm of activity of their own. Sarasvati is goddess of wisdom and all the creative arts, especially poetry, music, science, and learning. In ancient times she was associated with the Sarasvati River which comes out of the Himalayas to the West and was identified with the early Aryan rituals and hymns performed on its banks. This led to her identification with Vach, the goddess of speech and inventor of Sanskrit. She is the consort of Brahma and also sometimes of Vishnu.

In this carved wood image from South India, she is depicted in a more modern day sari along with the profusion of jewelry and a crown associated with most god and goddess images. She is seated on a lotus throne with her elevated right leg crossed over her left knee, accompanied by her vehicle, the peacock, and two female attendants waving chauris, or fly whisks. Behind her is a luxurious tree-like halo with numerous birds. The stringed instrument in her hands is called a vina and, like the pipa of China and lute of the west, is derived from the ancient Persian lute. In her other two hands she holds a palm-leaf book of scripture (a narrow rectangular object) and prayer beads. These attributes are also those of Brahma.



Sarasvati is a much loved and easily accessible goddess. In praying, Indians often start with an invocation to Sarasvati: "*Om Sarasvati swaha* " meaning "Oh Goddess Sarasvati hear my prayers." As the goddess of learning, she is prayed to by students especially on her special holy day when she is given special tribute and invoked to bless the students' books, pens, and notebooks.

Dancing Ganesha; Central India, c. 10th century

This image from a temple wall niche shows Ganesha dancing to the accompaniment of flutes and drums, one of the most delightful of all the forms of this irresistible god. In the medieval Central Indian style, the scene is crowded with subsidiary figures so you have to look closely to find all the hands and attributes. Some of his right hands are in dance postures, one holds an axe, and several are broken. His lower left hand is in the *varada*, or "gift giving" *mudra*. One hand holds a bowl of sweets and another his broken tusk. The god is bedecked with a modest amount of jewelry including a regal diadem. He is corpulent but graceful, dignified but also laughable.

The subsidiary figures include drummers on the far edges, (a common Indian drum is tapered and cylindrical, worn with a strap over the head and beaten on both ends with the hands), a flute player near Ganesha's left foot, and a worshipper on the lower left. As usual, he's got his trunk in the sweets. Even



animal (or animal-headed) gods may have other animals associated with them. Ganesha has the rat for his vehicle, here lightly etched on the base of the sculpture, and he often wears a snake around his middle; here it is draped over his left shoulder. Indian religious thinkers recognize that animals carry vitally important spiritual energy for the universe and in the human psyche. Thus, they play an important role in religious art and iconography. Not only do animals serve as supports for the gods, but some gods are part animal, part human. Several of Vishnu's early incarnations were as animals: a fish, a tortoise, a boar, and a man-lion. Perhaps Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, is the most popular god in India. The name Ganesha means lord (*ishvara*) of the *ganas* (the dwarfs or gnomes who guard the wealth and wisdom of the earth).

Like Sarasvati, Ganesha is a very accessible, and readily helpful god. All temple worship and probably most prayers begin with an invocation to Ganesha. Iconographically, Ganesha is usually represented at the entrance to the ritual area or the path of circumambulation. He is known as the remover of obstacles. His jovial, candy-loving, big-hearted nature allays ones fears and inhibitions which are some of the biggest obstacles to progress.

Shiva Somaskanda (with Parvati and Skanda), South India, Late Chola-Early Vijayanagar dynasty, late 13-14th century

This representation of Shiva shows the god sitting informally with his wife Parvati and their son Skanda. Made of bronze, its forms are freer and more fluid than those of the stone images, although it is modeled after them and follows the same canons of proportion and iconography. While still maintaining some of the slenderness and supple naturalism of Pallava and Chola style, the broad shoulders, full forms, and crisply modeled features demonstrate the influence of the style of the Deccan. Typically the relationship between the images is hierarchical with Shiva substantially larger than Parvati, and their standing child considerably smaller. The god and goddess wear necklaces, armbands, bracelets, anklets, and girdles but are not over-burdened with jewels. Shiva, the ascetic, does not wear a crown but has some ornaments in his matted hair, including the crescent moon, datura flower, and snake which symbolize his lunar- and earth-centered spirituality. Holding the axe and leaping deer, he is here in his form of Lord of the Beasts. His other hands are in the *abhaya* (fear not) and the *varada* (gift giving) mudras. Parvati's left hand is also in the gift bestowing gesture while the gesture of her right hand, *kataka mudra*, indicates the holding of a flower. Little Skanda, the future warrior Karttikeya, stands between them with his hands raised holding lotus buds. The tenons on the sides may have held a halo of some kind.



South Indian temple art included bronze images of the gods that could be taken out of the temple proper on special occasions and carried in processions and in circumambulations of the shrine where they could view and be viewed by the worshippers, a beneficial act called *Darshan*. The images were pulled in open carts by the devotees. Individual images were cast, but frequently the bronzes were made in sets or groups of images, such as this grouping of the Shaivite family. In this portable form, the god was seen as a proxy for the immovable god residing in the sanctum. This bronze piece would have been carried by means of the handles and holes in its base. At such times the figures would be draped in silk or cotton garments, jewelry, and perhaps flower garlands.

There are some early Pallava bronze images, but the major flourishing of bronze art in the south occurred in the Chola dynasty, particularly from the late 10th century on.... Certainly the making of bronze images indicates an affluent period and relatively peaceful time which allowed use of the precious metal resources to be diverted from coinage and weapons.... Bronze casters used the lost wax method: a model was made with wax; this was coated with clay to make a mold; the wax model melted out and molten bronze (a mix of five metals in South India) poured in to form the image. In the south the images were made of solid bronze while in the north they were hollow.

Shiva Nataraja, Chola Dynasty, bronze, 10th c., Art Institute of Chicago.

Shown here above a stylized lotus base in his awe-inspiring role of Nataraja (Lord of the Dance), Shiva is simultaneously destroying and recreating the earth at the end of one of the great cosmic cycles. In his upper left hand, he holds a flame, symbol of destruction and purification, which leaps out and encircles him as he dances the wild dance of destruction. His matted hair, usually piled on top of his head, has come undone and flies out around him, ending in cobra heads. His upper

right hand holds the narrow-waisted drum with which he beats the rhythm of the dance. The drum also symbolizes creation itself, since ether, thought to be the prime substance, is associated with sound. The solid ring within the circle of flames represents the new creation. In spite of his furious dance, Shiva's face is utterly calm, and his lower right hand is raised in the "do not fear" mudra, reassuring his worshippers that all is well. His right foot dances atop the Dwarf of Ignorance and Illusion, and his lower left hand points gracefully down to his raised left foot, pointing out to his devotees that he has transcended worldly illusion. Other attributes of Shiva include the cobra wrapped around his lower left hand and the tiny goddess Ganga, representing the Ganges River. (When people needed the river, the gods knew its force would cause great destruction to the earth when it poured down from heaven, so Shiva volunteered to absorb its force by allowing it to pour onto his matted hair before it flowed onto the earth.)



Shiva's sensual gestures and movements, along with the balanced grace of his form and his distinctly Indian body-type, cause many first-time Western viewers to assume this figure is female. Stylistically, the perfect Indian male body is idealized not with the muscle definition of the Western ideal male type, but with the smoother, seamless volumes and calm countenance of the Indian form representing the belief that true power comes from an inner, spiritual force, rather than from outer physical form.

Durga Kills the Buffalo Demon

The god Brahma granted a boon to Mahishasura, the buffalo demon, that no male could kill him. Thinking he was invincible, Mahisha led his demon army in a great battle with the gods and defeated them. Indra and the other gods ran to Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu and told them about the tumultuous battle and their defeat by the demons. From the anger of the gods a great energy emerged and took shape as the beautiful Goddess, Durga. All the gods gave her their weapons, and the mountain god gave her a lion for her vehicle. Durga is therefore more powerful than all the gods together. The gods reminded her that they are male and cannot defeat the terrible Mahisha, and asked her to conquer the buffalo demon. She agreed, and the gods shouted and cheered in anticipation of victory.



Mahisha heard the clamoring of the gods and sent his troops to investigate. They returned to tell the king of the demons about the magnificently beautiful and alluring Goddess they saw riding a lion. Enticed by their description, Mahisha asked Durga to marry him, but she refused him. The angry Mahisha then sent his troops to battle Durga's army. The Goddess's army defeated the demon troops, so Mahisha and Durga were left alone on the battlefield.

Mahisha ran to kill the Goddess's lion. Enraged, Durga threw her noose over the demon, but Mahisha had the ability to change his shape at will. He became a lion, so Durga cut off his head. He then became a man brandishing a sword, but Durga pierced him with arrows. Mahisha became an elephant and pulled Durga's lion with his trunk, but she cut off his trunk. Intoxicated with his power, the demon again assumed his buffalo form. Energized by her anger and the frenzy of battle, Durga stomped on Mahisha's neck and pierced him with her trident. The demon began to emerge from his own mouth, but the Great Goddess cut off his head and finally destroyed Mahisha. When the buffalo demon fell all the gods rejoiced and praised the Goddess, who promised to protect them forever.

This story is adapted by Elaine Craddock from the version translated and edited by Wendy O'Flaherty in *Hindu Myths*, 238-249.

The Birth of Ganesh



One day the Goddess Parvati wanted to take a bath. Having no servant of her own, she wanted someone to guard the door so she could bathe in privacy. So she rubbed some dirt off of her arm and formed a beautiful young boy named Ganesh. She installed him at the door and instructed him to keep everyone out while she bathed.

After a while the God Shiva came down from the mountain and wanted to see his wife Parvati. He tried to go in to see her but the little boy at the door refused him entry. Shiva was enraged at being kept from seeing his own wife. He shouted angrily, but the boy stood up to Shiva and refused to let him enter. So Shiva and his army fought with Ganesh, but the powerful little son of Parvati would not be defeated. Finally, Shiva asked Vishnu to help him, and with that help, Shiva was

able to cut off the boy's head.

When Parvati found out that the Shiva had killed her son, she was furious. In her grief and fury she resolved to destroy the world, and formed an army of saktis, or powers. At the Goddess's orders the army of saktis began to annihilate the world, including the gods. As the gods witnessed this devastation they felt hopeless and terrified, and decided to try to appease the angry goddess. Together with the sages they approached Parvati with reverence, propitiating her with praise and humility. Eventually Parvati responded with compassion to their entreaties, and told them that if her son were brought back to life she would stop her devastation.

Shiva told the gods to go north and cut off the head of whatever creature they first encountered. The first creature they encountered was an elephant, whose head they brought back and put on Ganesh's body. Through Shiva's power the boy was brought back to life as the beautiful and jolly god Ganesh, the Remover of Obstacles. Parvati and all the gods rejoiced.

This story adapted by Elaine Craddock from *Classical Hindu Mythology*, edited and translated by Cornelia Dimmitt and J.A. van Buitenen, 179-185.