

Understanding South Asia's Religious Art

By Jinah Kim and Todd Lewis



Figure 1: Dancing Ganesha, Lord of Obstacles. Eleventh to twelfth century, Bangladesh, Dinajpur District. Sculpture. Phyllite (65.41 x 33.66 x 12.7 cm).
Source: Los Angeles County Museum of Art website at <https://tinyurl.com/yy2s5xco>.

There are many ways to talk about the art of India (here, India is a shorthand for the South Asian subcontinent). From a serene stone sculpture of a meditating Buddha to the dynamic image of Dancing Shiva in bronze, to cosmic symbolism of soaring temples covered in sensuous celestial bodies built in stone to the perfect architecture of Taj Mahal, to colorful paintings of heroes and heroines of love stories and myths to intricate carvings on ivory, to stunning hand-woven or embroidered textiles, there is no shortage of wondrous sights to admire when it comes to Indian art. Exploring this kaleidoscopic world can be daunting and overwhelming for any instructor or student unfamiliar with the subcontinent's culture and history.¹ One needs a hook to enter this esoteric world: patronage and religion are perhaps the two most common threads used to tell the story about the art of premodern South Asia. In this essay, we suggest yet another lens through which to present the story of Indian art: that of ritual, which is often neglected in more conventional accounts of India's rich artistic traditions. Considering artistic outputs through the lens of ritual allows us to see various ways in which art served (and is still serving) Indic religious communities not only by illustrating mythic narratives and doctrinal teachings, but also by manifesting the belief and the worldview of the people who sponsored, engineered, and used it. It is important to recognize that art in South Asia, especially during premodern times, was not made for the sake of beauty or to express an individual artist's originality or creativity. We have to embrace a completely different working definition of art: art that can be living and functional as auspicious/divine presence and works to be enjoyed and experienced not just through the sight but also through all other senses. In this definition, art is something to be touched, adorned, and performed. Thinking about India's art through ritual helps us appreciate this performative aspect that may be lost in a museum setting or in a historical narrative focused on patronage, politics, or doctrine.

A stone sculpture of Dancing Ganesha, the hugely popular elephant-headed Hindu god, the remover of obstacles, now resides in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It may be a visual delight to study the pot-bellied, animal-headed god who gracefully dances on tiptoe on the back of his vehicle *idur* (pronounced "ee-dur," a rodent), which is carved expertly on gray-black stone with a polished sheen (Figure 1). If this Ganesha from medieval Bengal, spotless in a climate-controlled gallery environment, may enjoy curious admiration by museum visitors in North America, on any given day, another dancing Ganesha installed in the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu (southern Indian state), enjoys devotees' daily homage in the form of flower garlands, application of unguents, and other colorful and fragrant substances smeared upon his body while standing outdoors under an auspicious tree. This Ganesha welcomes pilgrims and worshippers to the famed temple dedicated to the Hindu goddess Meenakshi and her husband, Sundareshwar (literally "beautiful lord," a form of Shiva) (Figure 2). This sculpture is no longer just a piece of stone carved into a specific form—in this case, a four-armed, dancing Ganesha—but rather an immediate presence of the Hindu god Ganesha that interacts with the devotees directly in a physical and manifested manner.

This understanding of the tactility and immediacy of the transcendent divine predominates the practices of Indic religious traditions, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, and in a way helps us explore why figurative forms prevail in South Asian artistic traditions, whether in the fantastic images of gods and goddesses with multiple heads or limbs, or in heroes and heroines of love poems and epics. If the sensuous bodily form is the "leitmotif of Indian art," exploring India through ritual art puts the body of the people who designed, sponsored, and used these images in the very context of its production and use.² Before moving to explore some salient characteristics of Indian art with this in mind, we need to clear away a number of common misconceptions.

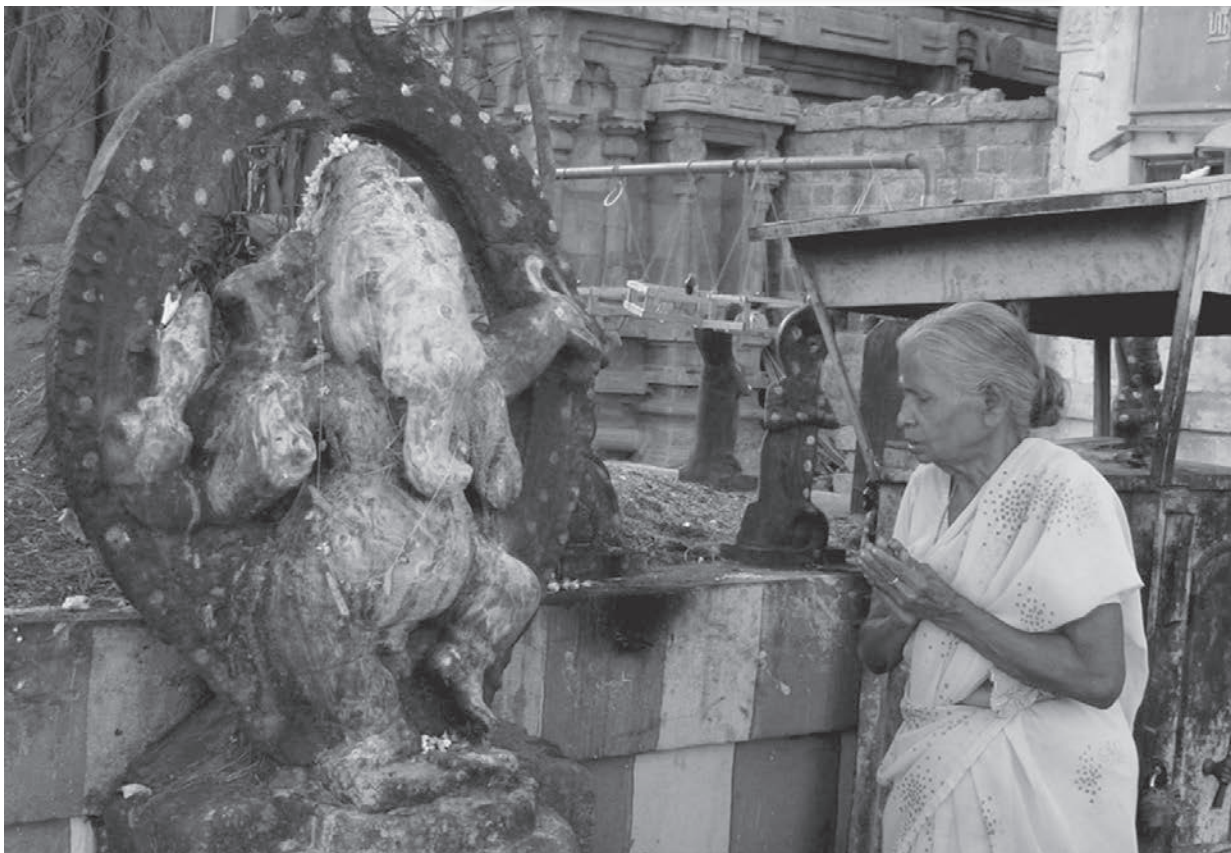


Figure 2: Paying homage to Ganesha, Meenakshi Temple, Madurai, Tamil Nadu. April 2004. Source: Photo © Jinah Kim.

Buddhism and Hinduism in Western Imaginations

Early scholars held that “true Buddhists” followed a rational, atheistic belief system and that most focused on meditation, fervently intent on nirvana realization; “true Hindus,” likewise, were those devoted to yoga and *samadhi* (trance meditation) in pursuit of *moksha* (final liberation from re-birth). This elitist Western stereotype also posits that as time went on, both traditions were corrupted by “popular” practices—especially rituals directed to “idols” and countless “superstitious” practices. These ideas have endured, especially in common portrayals of Hinduism and Buddhism in the West, and echoed by modern reformers in India. In fact, this “first draft of history” is wildly incorrect. What the earliest canonical texts and archaeological remains show, instead, is that both traditions had a much broader scope, far beyond the few religious virtuosos. The Buddha taught—as part of his Dharma (“teachings”)—that Buddhist monastics and householders must perform rituals: the former as part of their communal life, the latter by earning merit and securing worldly blessings through rituals focusing on shrines and images. Likewise, from its origins in the Vedic hymns, Hindu traditions were centered on rituals that were designed to please the gods, especially through offerings in a *homa* (sacred fire). In fact, most of the *Veda* consists of hymns to be chanted and detailed instructions for doing *homa* and many other rituals. A scholarly survey of both traditions from their origins onward show that in practice Hinduism and Buddhism were—and are—as much concerned with securing worldly blessings through ritual actions as they are with seeking transcendent goals. Both have a broad spectrum of focuses and functions.

Anyone who has visited Hindu communities in South Asia or Buddhist communities across Asia (or been welcomed in Asian immigrant temples in the West) can witness the reality of pragmatic practices dominating these faiths and how art serves this central purpose. It would be extremely rare, in fact, to find the *Upanishads* or the *Bhagavad Gita* or a Buddhist philosophical text such as the *Dhammapada* being read in a temple or monastery! It is important for students to understand the breadth of paths and personal possibilities in being a “good Buddhist” or “good Hindu.”³ With this basic understanding of Indian traditions in mind, let us now turn to the first topic: how to understand the many heads and limbs of the deities.

Multiplicity and Unity: Multi-Armed, Multi-Headed Gods and Goddesses

South Asian religious images, especially those in Buddhist meditation halls or *ashrams* (Hindu monasteries), are made to convey the central spiritual ideals of the faith. The body of a Buddha, for example, should convey physical strength, mental serenity, detachment, and discernment; the ancient tradition specifies thirty-two characteristic bodily features that each have a meaning. Most generally, Buddha images should be beautiful, conveying calm, discernment, detachment, and mastery of this



The Meenakshi Teemple, Madurai, Tamil Nadu. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/ya34zwh4>.



Shiva as Lord of Dance (Nataraja), Chola period, ca. eleventh century, Tamil Nadu, copper alloy (68.3 cm x 56.5 cm). Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art 1987.80.1.

The Dance of Shiva by Todd Lewis

One of the most lyrical and evocative symbols of Hinduism, especially in the sweeping design of South Indian artisans, is that of Nataraja, Shiva as Lord of the Dance. The upper right hand holds the twin-sided drum, from which sacred sound emerges, counting time and originating sound's creative resonance. The opposite hand shows on it a flame so that in Shiva's holding a fire, he points to his being a refuge in the fires of samsara. Fire also alludes to this deity's role as destroyer at the end of a great world era. Both hands move together in Shiva's great dance, ceaselessly integrating cosmic creation and destruction, including all the gods. Another hand shows the "fear-not" gesture, and the fourth points to his upraised foot, the place Hindu devotees touch most often in ritual. Shiva dances while treading on a demon who symbolizes heedlessness. Thus, to enter into the Dance of Shiva means to brave the circle of rebirth, transcend the limitations of time and apparent opposites, and join with the divine powers of the great deity whose grace and eternal energy can remove spiritual obstacles. Because the cosmos has become a manifestation of Shiva's power, a dance done simply for the purpose of his own entertainment, wherever individuals can cultivate artistic pleasure, they can find union with Shiva.

life. Similarly, the multiarmed Hindu deities convey their omnipresence, multiple powers, and readiness to aid devotees. Shiva as Nataraja ("King of the Dance") can encode an entire theology (see sidebar), as do depictions of Krishna (one of the human incarnations of Vishnu) dancing with the Cowherdesses (Gopis). Art can also provide a basis for understanding subtle theological conceptions, especially when accompanied by oral teaching.

One of the most common questions that students encountering the art of India for the first time ask is why there are many limbs and heads on a deity.⁴ For example, a painted image of Avalokiteshvara, a bodhisattva (a Buddhist enlightened being postponing the entrance to nirvana or final extinction to aid suffering beings) surviving in a sumptuously painted medieval Buddhist temple (called Sumtsek, literally "three-storied building") at Alchi in the Indian Himalayas (in today's Ladakh) can be bewildering at first sight (Figure 3):

the standing figure of this benign bodhisattva of compassion shows eleven heads in three different colors (white, red, and blue) and varying countenances (from peaceful to wrathful) stacked tall (3-3-3-1-1 configuration) and twenty-two arms splayed around like a body-halo holding various objects. Some (like *vajra* and *ghanta*, a thunderbolt and a bell held in uppermost hands on either side) are important ritual tools in certain Buddhist circles or symbolic attributes (like a rosary, a manuscript, a noose, and the gesture of giving), while others are weapons (like bow and arrow). How to comprehend such an abundant multiplicity in bodily forms? Two key terms can help: abstraction through figuration and unity in multiplicity.

First, it is important to recognize that these images manifest the abstract, whether the divine or the transcendent, in the most graspable, immediate form, of a human body. (The body here is not the anatomically correct, physical body of a human that is valorized in Renaissance art but rather the idealized body that can be reduced to a grid or a symbolic system in abstraction.) Every aspect of a deity's power is made immediately visible through multiple limbs and the attributes they hold, like all the marvelous weapons that, for example, the goddess Durga wields in her eight arms in slaying the buffalo demon, Mahishasura (Figure 4). To borrow today's superhero comics analogy, the lightning on Flash's suit along with red and yellow trim signal his superpower, that of lightning speed. Buddhist and Hindu deities are mighty powerful in ways that make the whole cast of the Avengers pale in comparison. Their extraordinary bodily features—like the twenty-two arms and eleven heads of the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara—represent, quite literally, his manifold ability to listen to and see the sufferings of all sentient beings, relieve their distress, and lead them on the path to enlightenment. The strength and ability of Indian deities to intervene in devotees' lives are clearly articulated in their fantastic forms with the various tools they hold at once. Consider, for example, the goddess Durga in a twelfth-century metal sculpture from the Himalayan foothills in Figure 4: she holds a sword and a shield, a skull cup and a bell, a bow and an arrow, a trident and the demon she subdued. Historical studies have shown that these tools changed and developed over time. To continue the superhero comics analogy, just as new suits of armor or new versions of superheroes appear in different circumstances or universes, the iconographic forms of Indian deities have changed in response to the different social, political, and environmental needs of the communities that revered them. For this reason, one encounters many different forms of the same deity, and a deity can be called in many different names or epithets: the more popular a deity, the more names and forms are used to refer to the god or goddess.

Second, the multiple limbs (and heads) on a single body ingeniously capture multiple moments of interventions in one frame. Avalokiteshvara's ability to see all around and intervene whenever and



Figure 3: Avalokiteshvara, ca. late eleventh or twelfth century. Second floor of Sumtsek, Alchi, Ladakh, India. Mural. Source: Photo © Jaroslav Poncar.

wherever is encapsulated in one frame, as if multiple rescue scenes are overlapped in one image. (This is particularly true in a form known as the thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara.) What would require multiple panels in a comic strip or a manipulated time lapse in a film is conveniently packaged in one body: a still image that is intended to be seen as constantly moving, transcending time. While delivering the message of awesome power immediately, such complex iconographies also can incite the onlooker to start recounting the stories that are compressed within them or to search for a teacher who can explain the code. The eight arms of the goddess Durga, seen in the twelfth-century metal image from the Chamba Valley (Himachal Pradesh, India), would immediately convey her magnificent power (see Figure 4). Once that recognition sets in, those in the know can start telling the story of how the male gods who could not deal with one monstrous buffalo demon had come together to ask the goddess to help and then give each of their signature weapons to her. This moment is not depicted here but can be pulled out from the details included in the image. Durga heroically steps on the buffalo while striking it with a trident, a weapon of Shiva, while her vehicle, the faithful lion, bites the animal in the behind. In one version of the story, the goddess chops the head of the buffalo off, and the demon who has taken the animal's form escapes from the severed neck. Here, the unnamed artist depicts the buffalo's head intact but indicates that the lifeforce of the buffalo has left by depicting his tongue rolling on the ground. The goddess grabs the helpless demon who emerged out of the buffalo by the top of his hair: in his last resistance, the demon holds up his tiny sword against the mighty goddess, but his diminutive size and compromised position make his futile attempt appear almost comical.

These stories, whether Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain, have been essential to the growth and maintenance of religious communities. Until very recent human history, the main ideas that constituted the bases of all religions were conveyed through narratives told in spoken word and through visual images in art. Painting and sculpture in the temples and monasteries of South Asia have been made for centuries to educate followers. As is true of all societies, religious traditions have had to be continuously explained and illustrated for the young.

Storytelling and Narratives: Educational and Community-Building Power of Art

Extensive narrative art traditions developed to serve Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain communities include sculpture and paintings that skillfully illustrate important tales about the lives of the Buddha or the Jina Mahavira (for Jains) or the glorious acts of the Hindu gods, such as Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, etc. The world-famous fifth-century murals at Ajanta Caves (in Maharashtra, India) show how Buddhists may have experienced the Buddha and his teaching, especially through the visual narratives that illustrate details of the Buddha's life and *jataka* (his previous lives), along with more devotional offerings and auspicious symbols and images of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Walls in Buddhist monasteries in Sri Lanka are also routinely covered with paintings illustrating details of the Buddha's life and the *jataka* tales.

As the world's first missionary religion, Buddhism spread from its land of origins in northeast India to all of South and Southeast Asia, then to China and East Asia. Monks and nuns were instructed by the Buddha to use vernacular dialects, matching the level of teaching with the capacity of the audience to follow. In this tradition, a wealth of art was created and designed to explain the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching. Most famous and well-employed would be the "Wheel of Life," which shows the six major rebirth venues for living beings in *samsara*, our world characterized by suffering, impermanence, and ignorance; according to one Buddhist monastic code, the Buddha instructs the monastics to place these paintings at the entrance of a monastery to educate visitors. It is still found at the entrance to most living Himalayan Buddhist monasteries like the Lamayuru monastery in Ladakh, India (Figure 5).



Figure 4: The Goddess Durga Slaying the Demon Buffalo Mahisha, twelfth century. Probably Chamba Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Brass (57.2 cm x 33 cm x 21.6 cm). Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art 2008.271.



Figure 5: Wheel of existence (bhavacakra) at the entrance of Lamayuru monastery, Ladakh, India. June 2005. Source: Photo © Jinah Kim.



Figure 6: Durga battling the buffalo demon, Mahishamardini Cave. ca 670–700 CE (reign of Parameshvara, Pallava Dynasty), Mamallapuram. Granite, tableaux. Source: Photo © Jinah Kim.



Figure 7: *Krishna Raising Mt. Govardhan*, c. 1825, Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, India. Pigments and gold on paper. Source: Philadelphia Museum of Art 1994–148–507.

The story of the great goddess Durga, which informs the brass sculpture discussed above, is told in the *Devimahatmya* (literally *The Hymn to the Great Goddess*), an important Sanskrit text that extols the goddess under whose feet were subdued many powerful demons. The episode of her killing the buffalo demon narrated in the text became popular all over the subcontinent from the seventh century onward; many temples, especially royally sponsored temples, carry the narrative on their walls, as seen on the impressive panel on the wall of a cave shrine (known as the Mahishasura Cave) at Mamallapuram in today's Tamil Nadu (Figure 6). Carved out of granite, one of the hardest stones to sculpt, this tableau vivant tells the story of the goddess's victory against the buffalo demon by choosing the moment before the goddess slays the buffalo. With more space and with more actors, the drama unfolds: the goddess strides over her mighty lion facing the buffalo demon, shown here in an anthropomorphic form with a buffalo head. Although here she is petite in size in comparison to the demon, there is no mistaking her victory: the buffalo demon retreats with his army, some of whom is already fallen to ground, while the goddess sits tall on her mount, charging with her bow and other weapons against the enemy. Her many *ganas* (dwarf-like figures around her) also come to her aid, and a female warrior strikes a victim with a sword in front of the goddess just as another victim falls headfirst from above this warrior.

The fate of the world hangs in balance: the artist(s) took pain to indicate the extreme danger posed by the buffalo demon, also marked by an umbrella over his head, a sign of respect and importance in the Indic context. His size here that is larger than the goddess conveys his power as a woeful foe, although the individual stances and the composition suggest that the goddess will ultimately prevail. Clever details and variations supplied by the unnamed artists add wit and humor, which incites telling of a story that can be further embellished and expanded by the knowledge experts such as a priest or elder in the community. Such images are often central to teaching religious and moral values, but at the same time, we should remember that performing these stories, which were conducted often with images—whether it is a street performance of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* or a singing about a local hero like Pabuji in Rajasthan villages or a storytelling session by a Buddhist priest in Nepal or singing of the hymns to the goddess during the Durga festival in West Bengal—provided (and still provides) entertainment and spectacles, bringing each community together.

Stories about Krishna, Vishnu's incarnation, became a major impetus inspiring artistic creations from the sixteenth century onward as the devotional communities centered around the mischievous yet charming and youthful god grew exponentially across northern India. Painters serving courtly patrons were skilled at bringing out the subtle humor and delight from well-known Krishna stories (recorded in texts like the *Bhagavata Purana*). So in an early nineteenth-century painting from the Himalayan foothills (Mandi, today's Himachal Pradesh, India), the artist portrays Krishna holding up the Mount Govardhan with a single pinky to protect the townspeople of the town Vrindavan, while angry Indra

riding his white elephant brings about a torrential storm with lightning (Figure 7). The sky is dark with swirling gold, and one can almost hear the thunder. The townspeople look up gratefully while Krishna stands with his hip swayed to one side and one leg bent in a relaxed posture, gazing gently toward a lady who is adoringly touching his arm. The painter added delightful details of little pods

under which families gather hiding from the rain (one of the men dearly holds a calf) and small children running about around women's and Krishna's feet, further animating the scene.

While such a courtly production, especially in the form of miniature, may have had a limited audience, certain artistic strategies developed in these circles did trickle down to inform artists serving communities with lesser means. Today, pilgrims visiting the town of Nathdwara, an important Krishna pilgrimage site in Rajasthan, can pick up pilgrims' souvenirs in various mass-produced media, like printed and framed images of Shrinathji, the special form of Krishna enshrined in the main temple, while painted images produced by the local artist workshops who serve the temple are also available. Miniature wooden dolls of Jagannath (a local form of Vishnu) with his brother and sister, and including many sets of dresses to change them, are popular souvenir items that pilgrims acquire from another important Vaishnava pilgrimage site of Puri in Odisha, often brought home to make their own Jagannath shrine ritually enlivened (Figure 8).

Living Arts and the Museum

A Buddhist or Hindu deity in a living shrine, whether at home or in a major temple, is treated as a living presence. In addition to the offerings of prayers, lamplight, incense, flowers, and food, the deities get special outfits, ornaments, jewelries, and furnishings. Sometimes these furnishings can become quite elaborate, which can include a bed, a sofa, and even a swing. In an early nineteenth-century painting from a Rajasthani court at Kota, the king (identified as Maharao Kishor Singh II of Kota, 1781–1828) offers his evening prayer while holding his puja tray with a burning lamp and flowers in front of an elaborate miniature silver shrine (Figure 9). The shrine is dedicated to miniature images of Krishna, and two consorts dressed in finery. In the lower terrace of the multitiered shrine structure is a chess set with mini cushions on either side, as if set up to be played by the god. Hanging glass lanterns in multiple colors and a chandelier, all with a heavy dose of gold trimming everywhere (most likely painted in real gold), suggest the opulence of the patron devotee. It also shows the intimate physical environment in which many of these images were interacted with and venerated. These enshrined images were meant to be touched and cared for, just as the dancing Ganesha welcoming devotees to a major Hindu temple like the Meenakshi Temple mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

The goddess Durga, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (introduced earlier, see Figure 4), was most likely an enshrined image like the Krishna image in the painting. The goddess stands in front of an extravagant background, which was cast separately to support the image from behind as a frame. Topped by a tiered roof with a lobed discus called *amalaka*, typical of the architectural finial of a Hindu temple, the design of the backdrop intimates that the goddess is installed inside a shrine. That the image must have been ritually activated and used is also indicated by the pedestal with a protruding sprout, which is designed to channel the water from ablutions offered to the deity. Another important physical trace of its function as a focal point of a ritual is the abrasion noticeable on the surface of the goddess's head. The shine on the forehead that nearly obliterates her eyebrows, parts of the hair, and the diadem is due to repeated touching.

Touching the deity (or the living presence of the deity in an image) with sandalwood powder or vermilion powder is one of the most common devotional actions

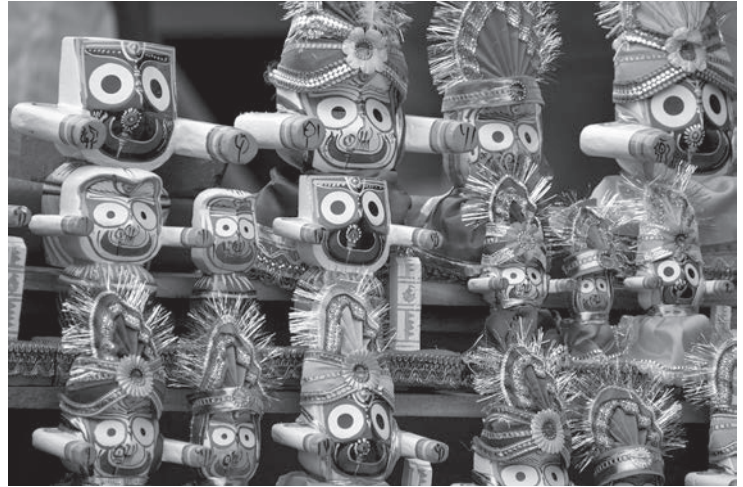


Figure 8: Miniature wooden dolls of Jagannath in Puri, Odisha, India. Source: 123RF Stock Photos. © Ravi Krishanan Gupta.



Figure 9: Maharao Kishor Singh II (1781–1828) of Kota Worshipping Krishna as Brij Rajji, c. 1825. Rajput Kingdom of Kota, Rajasthan. Gum tempera, tin, and gold on paper; overall: 24.5 x 18.8 cm. Source: The Cleveland Museum of Art, James Albert and Mary Gardiner Ford Memorial Fund 1978.71.



Figure 10: Somaskanda in worship (ca. eleventh-century metal sculpture with recent adornments), Ekamranatha Shiva Temple, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu. March 2004. Source: Photo © Jinah Kim.



Figure 11: Display of South Indian bronzes at the Newark Museum of Art with a consecrated and fully adorned metal statue of Parvati to the far right. August 2016. Source: Photo © Jinah Kim.

performed in South Asia. Unlike in a museum (or even a Christian church), touching is, in fact, the most natural devotional activity in the Indic context.⁵ The divine is present in a living image for immediate, tactile access. Many images that we see today in a museum setting were most of ten living presences to the communities in South Asia, and rarely seen in this denuded form without ornaments and garments when they were ritually active (Figure 10). If the image has been empowered with the divine presence through consecration and proper ritual maintenance by priests, and it has a proven record of channeling the divine presence and blessings to devoted petitioners, its aesthetic appearance is, in a way, secondary to the purpose of the image.

It has in recent years become a source of debate as to whether to introduce the original ritual context to an object in a museum or not, and how much ritual reactivation is appropriate. In the Newark Museum of Art in Newark, New Jersey, a metal image of the goddess Parvati that entered its collection was reactivated through a consecration ritual performed by a local priest with donations from the South Asian diaspora community (Figure 11). The goddess is installed with garments and jewelry as she would be installed in a living shrine, while the other sculptures from south India in the same display case remain bare as museum objects with miniature crowns installed in between them along with a photograph showing enshrined images from a living temple in south India, a way of acknowledging their original ritual context. According to Katherine Paul, the curator behind this experiment, this image receives special reverence from visitors from the diaspora community.⁶

Conclusion

In South Asia, Brahmins and Buddhist ritual masters perform dozens of rituals that define being a Hindu or Buddhist. One essential practice that ritualists of both traditions do for devotees is to draw down the presence of the focal divinity so it can be worshipped by them with songs, chants, food offerings, incense, etc. The image along with a *kalasha* (special vase) is essential for the successful performance of the *puja* (ceremony). For this purpose, devotees can use whatever image of the deity they have; it can be an exquisite work of art, a simple clay statue,

or an inexpensive lithograph print. The sanctity of the art is not contingent on its beauty since the success of the ritual depends on the performance of the priest. An inexpensive lithograph that is sold across India for the popular Vishnu Satya Narayan Vrata conveniently shows the entire ritual context (Figure 12). The Brahmin priest on the right conducts the ritual using a text in folio for a husband and wife sitting opposite him. Lamps and food offerings separate them (note the kalasha vase on the tray), as these have been laid out before a four-armed Vishnu standing behind holding his characteristic objects (conch, lotus, mace, discus) flanked by two Brahmin assistants.

Most Hindu or Buddhist householders of limited wealth cannot afford exquisite images like those now coveted by art collectors. For this reason, there are artists across South Asia who produce a great variety of images and paintings for use throughout the festival year that cost little and are typically sold in the market as festivals for the various deities approach. Although these may lack the refined

qualities, these images bring the presence of the divine into the minds and hearts of practitioners. Even lithographs and their knockoff copies sold on the streets can be venerated as artworks channeling the living divine presence after a ritual. Ultimately, the degree of sanctity in an image largely depends on the actions of its users, not only the correct performance of an appropriate ritual(s) but also the repeated devotional acts that leave physical traces.■

NOTES

1. There are a number of introductory essays and online teaching tools available for educators to engage with this material. A number of resources on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website are useful. For a general introduction to the art of South Asia, see <https://tinyurl.com/y5s5xepr>; for educational resources relating to Indian art assembled under the Timeline of Art, see the essay and related resources under <https://tinyurl.com/y5fcnyjt>; a sample lesson plan for teaching with the Indian art material, like dancing Shiva image, see <https://tinyurl.com/yyaobc3b>. Many more lesson plans are available under: <https://tinyurl.com/yyql6rda>.
2. Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries between Sacred and Profane in India's Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
3. We must obviously use blanket terms to label "Hinduism" and "Buddhism" as singularities here, a simplification that instructors will necessarily challenge. In addition, the study of all religions must recognize a "bell curve" that maps the range of how individuals engage with their religion. This was explained in an earlier article: Todd Lewis, "Getting the Foundations Right When Teaching Asian Religions," *Education About Asia* 15, no. 3 (2010): 5–13.
4. Fascination or bewilderment with such images is an age-old response to Indian images in the West, as Partha Mitter observes, "the problem of accommodating multiple limbed Indian gods in the European aesthetic tradition became the leading intellectual pre-occupation as early as the sixteenth century. Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), vii.
5. Ritual practices in South Asia vary by region and deity, regarding exactly who can touch the image. In the south, brahmins only are permitted to touch the deity on behalf of devotees.
6. I thank Katherine Paul for sharing her story during my visit in 2016.



Figure 12: *Vishnu Satya Narayan Vrata*, lithograph. Source: Todd Lewis collection.

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*This article is dedicated
to the memory of
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