

Characteristics of Indian Art

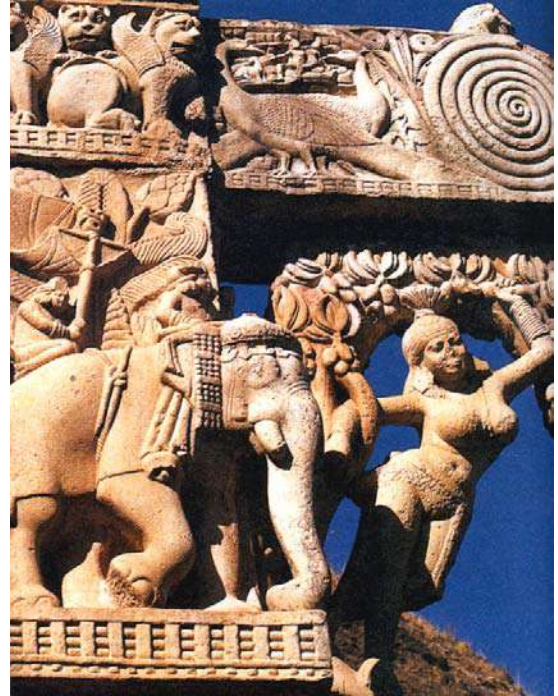
1. Symbolism

Since Hindu deities and Buddhist figures all have idealized human bodies making each indistinguishable from all the others, a set of easily recognizable symbols is necessary to identify the deities and describe their natures. These symbols include:

***Their Attributes**— Specific symbols used to identify the deities. For example, Vishnu is dressed like a king, with a crown, and royal jewelry. He holds his weapons—the discus and the mace—and the conch he uses to call his troops to battle. Shiva often wears the animal skin of an ascetic and has stylized, piled-up matted hair with a crescent moon in it. As the lord of the beasts, he sometimes has cobras wrapped around him or a tiny antelope rising from one of his hands. His weapon is a trident, and as lord of the dance, he holds the flame of destruction and the drum of creation. In Shiva temples, he is represented by the cylindrical *linga* in the inner sanctum. Durga, the goddess who defeats the buffalo demon, usually has at least eight arms to show her superior power and holds the weapons given to her by all the other deities. She is frequently shown in the act of killing the buffalo demon or standing on his corpse. Ganesha, the jolly elephant-headed god, holds his bowl of sweets in one hand, an axe in another, his broken tusk in another. The Buddha is identified by attributes including his long earlobes, the tuft of hair between his eyebrows, the bump on his cranium, the wheels inscribed on his palms and the soles of his feet, and the lions found on his throne.

***Their Vehicles or Mounts**— The deities are identified by the animals they ride. The animal's nature also can reveal their nature, as the mighty Durga rides her tiger and Shiva rides his devoted bull, Nandi. The non-threatening Ganesha, on the other hand, has a rat for his vehicle. On a more symbolic level, each deity's vehicle represents the **ideal devotee**, always focused on the object of their love and devotion, always ready to serve.

***Their Stories**— The art frequently depicts stories of the deities, such as the victory of Durga over the buffalo demon, or Vishnu's dreaming the creation of the world while he is sleeping on the great cosmic serpent and getting a foot massage from his consort, Lakshmi. As in other religions in which large numbers of the devotees have been illiterate, the art is used to both to teach the stories and to remind the devotees of stories they are already familiar with. Images of the Buddha illustrate moments in his life, such as his birth, when he left the palace he'd grown up in, when he was a severely emaciated ascetic, when Mara sent dancing girls and armies to distract him from his



meditation, the moment of his calling on the earth to witness his achieving enlightenment, his first sermon, and his death.

Other symbols are found in Indian art that are used commonly, not associated with just one particular deity:

- ***Multiple arms** indicate that the figure is a deity, representing their superhuman powers.

- ***Mudras** are hand gestures through which the deities communicate with their worshippers. These gestures include the “do not fear” mudra, the granting of wishes mudra, the worshipful mudra, the mudra of meditation, and the mudra of teaching, among many others.

- ***Asanas** are the postures used to reflect the *mood* of the deity – Hindu deities’ asanas reveal them in moments of fierceness, relaxation, or the iconic stance showing their willingness to be at one with the devotee. The Buddha is usually seen in either a meditative lotus position or standing.

- ***Half-closed eyes** symbolize meditation, emphasizing looking inward and cultivating spiritual control.

- ***A third eye in the middle of the forehead** signifies the deity’s divine wisdom and power. Most frequently it appears on Shiva, but it will also be seen on Durga and other deities.

- *The **lotus** represents transcendence and purity, since it grows from the muck at the bottom of a pond, rises up through the water, and blooms above the surface.

- ***Fire** represents destructive, purifying power.

- ***Drums**, since they make sound that travels through the air, represent ether, the prime substance from which all creation was derived.

- ***Snakes**, symbols of regeneration and fertility, are positive symbols, having none of the association with evil they have in Western art.

2. Architectural Settings

Indian art is often **united with architecture**, serving the purpose of aiding devotees in ritual worship. Narrative relief panels are found on the drums of Buddhist stupas and the exterior walls of early Hindu temples. Sculptures of the deities appear in niches in both the exterior and the interior walls. These all play an important role in Hindu and Buddhist worship, since both involve the act of circumambulation, walking clockwise around the temple (or stupa) and worshipping the deities they believe reside both in the images and in the larger universe.

3. Sensuality

Indian art has been described by many as the most sensuous, even the most erotic art in the world. (NOTE: Be certain that students understand that “sensuous” means “appealing to the senses,” since their understanding of the word is that it ALWAYS implies eroticism. Indian art is both sensuous—seen in the emphasis on ornately decorated forms and lush vegetation—and erotic, with images more specifically suggesting sexuality.)

Idealized, voluptuous female bodies: *Yakshis (nature spirits) represent procreative abundance and bounty and represent the generosity of the gods. The female form is based on the *vajra* (2 headed thunderbolt) or the double drum. Both have full rounded forms connected by a narrow waist in the middle. The *yakshis* and Hindu goddesses are large-breasted, narrow-waisted, round-hipped beauties.

*** Idealized, sensual male bodies as well, with smooth, simplified body volumes and very little muscle definition.** American students frequently assume that Hindu gods are female simply because they are not the “macho men” of Western art from the Greek Archaic period on.

***Body parts are based on ideal forms in nature**, such as torsos like tree trunks, arms like elephant trunks or bamboo shoots, and eyes like lotus petals or fish.

***Explicit references to sexual union** symbolize the creative force within the universe. Sexual love (*kama*) is one of the four life aims of Hindus, and is also understood as symbolic of human love of and union with the divine, the closest metaphor in human experience of union with the deities.

****Temple at Khajuraho***

****Maithunas—loving couples in sexual embrace***

***Abstracted sexual organs** (the male *linga*, the female *yonis*), particularly in Shiva temples, symbolize creative force and the union of the male and female principles.

***Twining plant forms**, leaves, flowers, vines, as framing devices around sculptures, niches, doorways, and gateways, as well as integrated into sculptural design and relief sculpture, function as sensuous symbols of fertility, growth and prosperity. (Here is where it is important to remind students that “sensuous” does not mean merely “erotic.”)

***Profusion of images and decorative ornamental patterns** (*horror vacui*) are typical in ALL forms of Indian art and architecture.