



The Gods Appeal to the Great Devi for Help, folio from a Devimabhatmya series with sanskrit text in Devanagari script on reverse, India, Himachal Pradesh, Kangra, early 19th century, colour and gold on paper, lent by Narendra and Rita Parson

Puja & Piety

Hindu, Jain and Buddhist Art from the Indian Subcontinent

by Jasleen Kandhari

TO CELEBRATE its 75th anniversary this year, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA) has curated an exhibition of Indian art (on display until August), exploring the relationship between aesthetic expression and devotional practice, or *puja*, in three important religions which originated in India: Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Drawn primarily from SBMA's collection of Indian art, which has developed in recent years, this exhibition presents 160 works of art in a variety of medium, including paintings and sculpture over the past two millennia, all of which were used for worship in temples and homes to processional bronzes and wooden chariots. The museum, located in southern California, was founded in 1941 with an Asian collection comprising over 2,600 objects in a variety of media, spanning a period of 4,000 years from across the breadth of Asian including the Indian subcontinent.

Puja is the devotional act of worshipping a god, or deified teacher in these three religions through invocations, prayers, songs and rituals. It is through the act of puja that the devotee makes a spiritual connection with the divine in order to seek release from the cycle of rebirth to attain the transcendental state of *moksha*, *nirvana*, or enlightenment, usually facilitated by a ritual object in the form of a painting, sculpture, print or even an element from nature. It is these rituals that form the focus of this exhibition with contemporary photographs and videos of private



Saint Mirabai, a 16th-century Hindi poetess and devotee of Krishna, painting by Pemji of Chittor, India, Rajasthan, Mewar, dated 1838, colour and gold on paper, gift of Pratapaditya and Chitra Pal, Santa Barbara Museum of Art

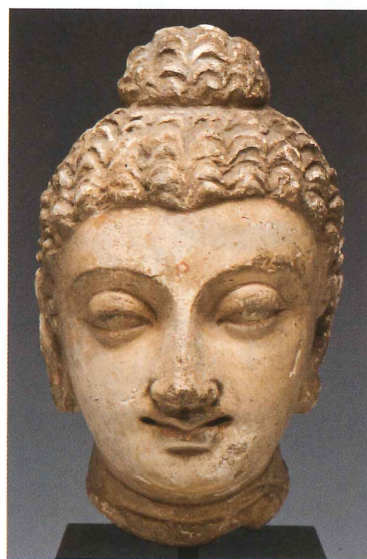
worship and public rituals providing contextualised insights for the classical and popular forms of art on display.

Hindu belief is based on the four Sanskrit texts, the *Vedas*, the oldest dating from around 1500-1200 BC. Besides this acknowledgement of the authority of the Vedic tradition there

are no other doctrinal bases but there are many diverse schools of thought, gods, goddesses, ascetics, deified heroes each with their own rich and complex mythologies. Contemporary Hinduism is a complex religious system consisting of several different cults based around various gods, mainly the central gods of the Hindu pantheon, Shiva, Vishnu, and the goddess Devi, or Shakti.

Hindu art is primarily devotional in nature with the concept of the divine being represented in a human or superhuman and symbolic manner in the form of gods and goddesses. Hindu sculpture was produced for two reasons, as an image of the god for veneration within a temple or on a domestic altar, or as a carving to cover the exterior walls of temples or portable shrines illustrating the legends of the deities to the devotees. The proportions, attributes and poses of the Hindu sculptural representations were dictated in the sacred texts, the *shilpashstras*, or art manuals, which are found in the two texts, the *Citralakshana* and the *Citrasutra* section of the *Visnudharmottara purana*.

Shiva, literally meaning 'the auspicious one', is one of the greatest and also paradoxical Hindu gods as he represents contrasting aspects, an ascetic yet also the husband of Parvati, a dancer, musician and the creator and destroyer of all things. A 12th-century, granite sculpture of Shiva as the Supreme Teacher, Dakshinamurti, from Tamil Nadu is also on display. Vishnu is another important male deity of the Hindu Trinity of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu who is the preserver and protector of creation. A fine 11th-



Head of Buddha with a prominent topknot, ancient Gandhara, present-day Pakistan, 4th/5th century, stucco with traces of colour, anonymous gift, Santa Barbara Museum of Art



Temple sculpture with dancing Ganesha, India, Uttar Pradesh, 11th century, sandstone, anonymous loan in memory of Ann Witter

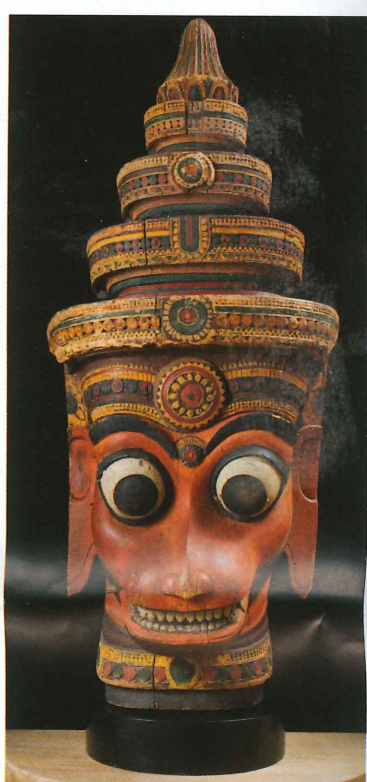
century sandstone sculpture of Brahma as the eighth incarnation of Vishnu on display was originally carved on a Vishnu temple wall in northern India, for Vishnu had many incarnations which he manifests at different times, with his 10 forms of incarnations, or Dashavatara, based on the biological evolution of living beings, from aquatic and terrestrial animals like the fish, tortoise, and boar – to human-animal forms and finally human forms.

What is unique in Indian art is the conveyance of emotional mood projected by the painting or sculpture called *rasa*. Art and mythology are linked by *rasa* and this concept has existed since the writing of the *Natyasastra* in 5th century BC, the Indian codification on dance, music, dramatic arts and aesthetics in which artists are instructed to use gesture, expression, passion and colour to evoke one of the nine *rasa*. In the painting of slaying the *asura* Mahisha, the buffalo demon by the goddess Durga such as the 19th-century painting of goddess Kali, the manifestation of the great goddess Devi, from Calcutta.

Unlike Hinduism, which derives its authority from ancient scriptures of unknown origin, Jainism and Buddhism were founded by historical figures. Jainism is based on the teachings of the spiritual teachers of the Jain tradition called *Tirthankaras* or *Jinas*, the last and 24th *tirthankara* called Mahavira. He is considered to have been a contemporary of Shakyamuni Buddha and preached on the path to liberation through ascetic practices and extreme non-violence in India in the 6th century.



Digambara altarpiece with suparshvanatha and four other Jinas (panchatirthika), India, Karnataka, 15th century, brass, lent by Narendra and Rita Parson



Monumental head of Hanuman, India, Kerala, 18th century, wood with pigment, lent by Narendra and Rita Parson

The *tirthankaras* on display include Bahubali standing in the Kayotsanga, body abandonment posture in the form of a 15th-century brass figure, an 18th-century painting of Shvetambara tantric composition with a colossal image of Jina Parshavanatha from Mewar, and a 15th-century brass Digambara altarpiece with Suparshvanatha and four Jinas, Panchatirthika from Karnataka.

Buddhism is based on the teachings, or Four Noble Truths, of the historical Buddha called Shakyamuni who lived from mid-6th century to circa 480 BC, and died aged eighty. The earliest sculptures in the exhibition are fine examples of the first appearances of the Buddha in an aniconic form or a garlanded Bodhi Tree and a birth scene on a fragment of the 2nd-century limestone frieze from a stupa in Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh. Images of the Buddha in his earliest human form that are found in Mathura and Gandhara from 1st to 4th centuries are on display, including a stucco Gandharan Buddha head with the physical characteristics called *lakshana*, 'the one who has achieved enlightenment' visible in the cranial bump called *ushnisha*, which indicates special wisdom, the mark between the eyebrows called *urna* representing the third eye of supernatural vision, and the small tightly coiled ringlets of hair which symbolises the renunciation of worldliness.