

Santa Barbara Museum of Art Exhibit to Showcase Hindu Deities

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Balarama as the Eighth Avatar of Vishnu and Elder Brother of Krishna
(Madhya Pradesh, India, 11th century. Sandstone. Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of Wright S. Ludington.)

The Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA) in California will showcase images of Hindu deities in an upcoming exhibition, 'Puja and Piety,' which will run from April 17 to Aug. 28, 2016. The show will exhibit more than 160 objects of diverse media created over the past two millennia for temples, home worship, festivals, and roadside shrines. From monumental painted temple hangings to portable pictures for pilgrims, from stone sculptures to processional bronzes and wooden chariots, from ancient terracottas to various devotional objects for domestic shrines, this exhibition aims to examine and provide contextualized insights for both classical and popular works of art. This exhibition is the first in

North America to celebrate the diversity of South Asian art by examining the relationship between aesthetic expression and the devotional practice, or puja, in the three native religions of the Indian subcontinent.

Through the integration of contemporary photographs and videos of private worship and public rituals with art, the exhibition demonstrates that the primary function of the objects was not simply to be exhibited as mute expressions of the unknown artist, but as material embodiments of the divine with which to interact both emotionally and spiritually. Individuals from varying levels of society—the patron, the artist, and the worshippers—collectively created the works of religious devotion shown in this exhibition.



The sandstone sculpture in the exhibition was carved for the wall of a Vishnu temple, while the granite sculpture was likely used in a Southern temple dedicated to Shiva. Many of the Jain items in the exhibition were originally used in homes for private worship. They are images of Jina or a Jain saint (left), either seated in meditation or standing in a “body abandonment posture,” an erect immobile posture with arms hanging free from the body, which is considered a form of severe asceticism.

Due to its wide reception throughout Asia and its practical disappearance from its homeland in northern India, Buddhism is presented in this exhibition and catalogue through the historical context of its Indian heritage, supplemented with examples of its practice in the neighbouring regions of Nepal and Tibet in order to reconstruct the practices as they have developed in India. The earliest sculptures in the exhibition are fine examples of some of the first appearances of Buddha in an aniconic form of a garlanded Bodhi Tree or a birth scene on a fragment of the frieze from a stupa in Nagarjunakonda. Images of Buddha in his earliest human form found in the Mathura and Gandhara regions from the 1st to the 4th centuries are also on display with varied regional styles from flourishing Buddhist centres.

Talking about SBMA’s initiative exhibiting Hindu artifacts, Hindu statesman Rajan Zed says that art had a long and rich tradition in Hinduism and ancient Sanskrit literature talked about religious paintings of deities on wood or cloth. Rajan, who is President of Universal Society of Hinduism, urged major art museums of the world, including Musee du Louvre and Musee d’Orsay of Paris, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Los Angeles Getty Center, Uffizi Gallery of Florence (Italy), Art Institute of Chicago,

Tate Modern of London, Prado Museum of Madrid, National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, etc., to frequently organize Hindu art focused exhibitions, thus sharing the rich Hindu art heritage with the rest of the world.

SBMA comprises of 27,000 works of art spanning over 5,000 years of human creativity, including classical antiquities and Monet paintings; serves about 150,000 visitors annually. Larry J. Feinberg is the Director, while John C. Bishop Junior is the Trustees Chair.

The ‘Puja and Piety,’ exhibition is organized by Susan Tai, SBMA’s Elizabeth Atkins Curator of Asian Art, in collaboration with Pratapaditya Pal, guest curator and editor of the catalogue. The Santa Barbara Museum of Art is a privately funded, not-for-profit institution that presents internationally recognized collections and exhibitions and a broad array of cultural and educational activities as well as travel opportunities around the world.

Puja and Piety will be on view from April 17 through Aug. 28 at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State Street, Santa Barbara, CA.

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