

M.LiT Tour by Chelsea Clowacki

Tour title: Glimpse of the East

Description: Learn facts and stories about the Hindu and Buddhist sculptures in the South Asian gallery. Discover the beauty behind the work made by the people to worship their God and the vanity trait of humans which some Gods represent.

Location: South Asian Art Gallery

Introduction: Welcome to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts! My name is Chelsea Glowacki. I am a participant in VMFA's Museum Leaders in Training program. Our tour theme this year is Social Trend: Beauty and Vanity. This evening I will be taking you on a tour discussing how religious sculptures of Gods depict the vanity within humans.

Beauty and vanity are very relevant in our society. How do we see beauty and vanity in our society today? *Make-up, fashion, TV shows, plastic surgery, celebrities, magazines etc.* Our trends are never constant and go back and forth throughout the decades. Even since the Medieval ages in India and China artists have displayed beauty and vanity in all sorts of ways. Follow me and we'll see how these social trends have influenced religious art in many countries for over hundreds of years.



Object 1:

Shiva "King of Dancers", Late 12th, early 13th century

Unknown, South India

Bronze

38 5/8" x 28" x 12"

Does anybody know the name of this Hindu God?

Our first stop is one of the great God Shiva's manifestations or forms, is that of a dancer. In the sacred texts, Shiva is known as the King of Dancers. In this sculpture Shiva reveals himself as the great god who created the universe, sustains its rhythmic life, and destroys it at the end of time. In his right hand he holds a drum, the symbol of sound. In the palm of his upper left hand, he reveals a flame (now missing), a symbol of the world at the end of time. His other right hand is raised in the mudra meant to give the devotee freedom from fear and the other left hand points to his upraised left foot, a symbol of release. Lastly his front foot tramples the demon of ignorant forgetfulness, for if the devotee overcomes ignorance by fully realizing the true meaning of

ultimate reality as revealed in Shiva's dance, he will be delivered from fear and attain release from this finite world forever.

Can anyone tell me something unique about this sculpture, particularly in the body and facial features?

Hindu gods are unique because they all have a gender neutral quality. Notice his thin waist, full hips, broad shoulders and gentle face. This figure was cast in the lost wax process then casted in bronze. Notice the four square holes on the base of the sculpture. Poles could be inserted through these openings, and the icon would be carried through the streets in ritual ceremonies. His right ear lobe is empty but the left earring is that of a female. His braids which touch the halo and include small serpents and flowers to represent the great River Ganges which fell from heaven through Shiva's hair.

Transition: Now that we looked at Shiva, let's go see a family relative and that is his son Ganesha.



Object #2
Seated Ganesha
Unknown
Early 12th century
Stone Carving

What is the first thing that you notice when you look at this sculpture?

Few Hindu Gods are more beloved than Ganesha. He was the son of Shiva and Paravati and he is the god of "Good Fortune" and the "Remover of All Obstacles". Ganesha is depicted here as benign, regal divinity ready to receive the worship of his many devotees. His trunk reaches toward a bowl of sweets that is held in his lower left hand and in his upper left is a lotus. A serpent girds the god's large belly, which is said to be full of his favorite sweet balls, symbolizing the seeds of the universe. In his right hand bears an axe and his lower right holds his severed right tusk.

Does anybody know the story behind Ganesha having an elephant's head?

Parvati created a child, Ganesha, out of dust and moisture around her for she wanted someone to protect her. Ganesha on guard outside of her bedroom and ordered no one to be allowed entry. Shiva was refused by Ganesha and this gravely angered Shiva and so he lopped off Ganesha's Head. Parvati demanded something to be done about it and Shiva said he would replace Ganesha's lost head with the head of the first thing that crossed his path, which turned out to be an elephant. Ganesha was riding his vehicle, a mouse, (ironically) one day encountered a serpent in the road. The mouse became afraid of the snake and caused Ganesha to fall, causing Ganesha's ample belly to burst and all the sweet balls he had eaten to roll out. Ganesha got up, took the now dead serpent and wrapped up his stomach with it, and proceeded to 're-eat' his favorite sweet balls. The moon seeing this laughed at the scene causing Ganesha to become angry. To stop the moon from laughing, Ganesha ripped out his tusk and threw it at the moon, putting out the Moon's light. This is how Indian children today are taught the waxing and waning phases of the moon.

This type of sculpture is an 'Indian rococo', this is when the figure is covered with a mass of ornamentation, anklets, bracelets, necklaces and the tall crown at the top. Note that, much like Indian sculptures, this piece though three dimensional, it is not carved in the round. Indian sculptures were generally placed within an architectural setting, from which it could be viewed from only one vantage point. Lastly his belly is smooth for all the years of blessings he has received from rubbing his belly.

Transition: So we have been looking at Hindu sculptures let's go a little more east and head to our last piece which is Buddhist which was created in China



Object #3

Yamantaka

Unknown

18th Century, Sino-Tibetan (Chinese)

Polychromed wood

Just by looking at this sculpture what do you think this creature represents?

This sculpture is of the Buddhist deity Yamantaka, a buffalo-headed Manjushri that represents the triumph of spiritual wisdom over death. Manjushri assumed the buffalo-headed form of Yama, the Lord of Death, in order to conquer death. He is ferocious and triumphant and stands on a lotus platform. With his flaring red nostrils, popping eyes and gaping jaw and he is covered

in a garland of severed heads. The animal-headed god wears a skull bowl and a vajra chopper in his two main hands these symbolize the destruction of all internal and external obstructions to the devotee's quest for religious enlightenment.

How many hands to you think is on this sculpture?

The remaining 32 hands hold other symbols and each one reveals a different facet of spiritual wisdom. This sculpture's pose, face and dynamically positioned arms closely resemble those of gilded metal images cast in China under the patronage, Ming. This sculpture was made for emperors to present to important Tibetan Buddhist temples in China, Mongolia and Tibet. It could have also been carved for the shrine or chapel of a monastery in Tibet or China. This is one of the largest and most magnificent wood sculptures of a Tibetan Buddhist deity in the West. Lastly this sculpture is lucky to still be around today not only are these sculptures very difficult to transport, but many of them were destroyed by the Chinese communists.