



देवी devi

devi: the great goddess

- who is devi
- aspects of devi
- interpreting devi
- tantric devi
- for kids
- resources



Detail of "Bhadrakali Appears to Rishi Chyavana." Folio 59 from the Tantric Devi series. India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca 1660-70. Opaque watercolor, gold, silver, and beetle-wing cases on paper. Purchase, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution F1997.8

Welcome to **Devi: The Great Goddess**. This web site has been developed in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name. The exhibition is on view at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery from March 29, 1999 through September 6, 1999. Like the exhibition, this web site looks at the six aspects of the Indian goddess Devi. The site offers additional information on the contemporary and historical worship of Devi, activities for children and families, and a list of resources on South Asian arts and cultures.

You may also want to view another Sackler web site: [Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion](#), an on-line guide for educators explores Hindu worship and provides lesson plans and activities for children.

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| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

◀ homepage

who is devi



[Full image and description.](#)
Lakshmi Poster.

manifestations of devi





Who Is Devi

The Great Goddess, known in India as Devi (literally "goddess"), has many guises. She is "Ma" the gentle and approachable mother. As Jaganmata, or Mother of the universe, she assumes cosmic proportions, destroying evil and addressing herself to the creation and dissolution of the worlds. She is worshiped by thousands of names that often reflect local customs and legends. She is one and she is many. She is celebrated in songs and ▶ [poems](#).



[Full image and description.](#)
Dancing Bhadrakali Adored by the Gods. Lent by a private collection on loan to Museum Rietberg, Zurich.



Devi is all-important in ▶ [Hinduism](#) , but there are also forms of female divinity in ▶ [Buddhism](#)  and ▶ [Jainism](#).  Today millions of Hindu men and women conduct regular ▶ [pujas](#)  to Devi through one of her many manifestations. For some she is their primary deity while for others she is part of a greater pantheon. All Hindu goddesses may be viewed as different manifestations of Devi. In some forms she is benign and gentle, while in other forms she is dynamic and ferocious, but in all forms she is helpful to her devotees.

[Full image and description.](#)

Parvati. Lent by a private collection.



previous

next



| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Lakshmi Poster

Contemporary chromolithograph of Lakshmi.

Photo by Neil Greentree

[Return](#)



देवी devi

◀ homepage

who is devi



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Mohra of Devi. Lent by a private collection.

manifestations of devi ●

Manifestations of Devi

Manifestations of Devi are celebrated and worshiped throughout India. While there are gods and goddesses universally worshiped in India, nearly every Hindu community has its own specific deity to whom they specially relate. Usually that deity is a goddess as it is always a female deity who protects a village or town and its inhabitants.



[Full image and description.](#)

Goddess on a swing. [Arthur M. Sackler Gallery](#), Smithsonian Institution.

The traditional Western formulation of the Hindu trinity in which Brahma is the creator, ► [Vishnu](#) ◀ is the preserver and ► [Shiva](#) ◀ is the destroyer, observes the Hindu world on the Judeo-Christian model. Brahma is of lesser significance as he cannot act until Vishnu gives him authority to do so. The three dynamic deities are Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi, each of whom encompasses all three divine functions of creation, preservation, and destruction.

◀ previous

next section ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Mohra of Devi

India, state of Himachal Pradesh, 8th or 9th century. Brass. Lent by a private collection.

This monumental mask (mohra) of Devi is a super example of the brass mohra tradition in the hills of Himachal Pradesh in northern India. Depictions of Devi and god Shiva in the form of brass or silver mohras are peculiar to the Himalayan regions where until early in this century, wooden masks of deified chieftains were widely worshiped. Groups of mohras are usually secured to chariots and taken out in procession during festivals. However, the extraordinary workmanship of this heavy and unusually large Devi mohra suggests that it was enshrined for worship within an important Himachal temple.

[Return](#)



Goddess on a Swing

India, state of Madhya Pradesh, Bastar district, 19th-20th century. Brass. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Purchase S1990.6

The Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh (central India) has a vast population of tribal people who have retained old customs. The area abounds with female deities, often called matas, or mothers, some of whom are known and venerated only within a single village. Bastar's ritual brasses are either worshiped or given as offering to deities in fulfillment of vows. Here the goddess and swing were cast as one piece that was attached to the supporting structure by twisted wire. Plates on which devotees may burn incense pellets are in her hand, balanced on her head, and placed atop the shrine.

[Return](#)



देवी devi

◀ homepage

aspects of devi



[Full image and description.](#)

Markama. Photo by
Cornelia Mallebrein.

cosmic force ○

dayini ○

heroine ○

local protector ○

semi divine ○

woman saints ○

Aspects of Devi

There are many approaches to looking at Devi: chronological, religious, or by function. Here we have chosen to observe Devi through her six main functions, beginning with her most forceful and dynamic form and moving toward less potent forms.

Devi is first seen as [cosmic force](#), where she destroys demonic forces that threaten world equilibrium, and creates, annihilates, and recreates the universe. Next, in her gentle, radiant [dayini](#) form, she is the gracious donor of boons, wealth, fortune, and success. As [heroine](#) and beloved, Devi comes down to earth and provides inspiring models for earthly women.

Devi is then seen as a [local protector](#) of villages, towns, and individual tribal peoples, where she is concerned only with local affairs. In her fifth aspect, Devi appears as [semi-divine](#) force, manifesting herself through fertility spirits, and other supernatural forms. Finally, she is also represented in [woman saints](#), who are born on earth but endowed with deep spirituality and other-worldly powers.

◀ previous section

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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[IMAGE: Detail of "Bhadrakali Appears to Rishi Chyavana." Folio 59 from the Tantric Devi series. India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca 1660-70. Opaque watercolor, gold, silver, and beetle-wing cases on paper. Purchase, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution F1997.8]

| [NEXT](#) |

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

◀ homepage

interpreting devi



[Full image and description.](#)

Procession image of Parvati.
Photo by Dick Waghorne.

devi through the ages ○

worshiping devi ○

devi and women ○

Interpreting Devi

In this section, we explore how the Goddess has evolved through the centuries and how society interacts with her. [Devi Through The Ages](#) discusses the iconographic and symbolic development of the Hindu goddess from prehistoric Indian times to the modern age. [Worshiping Devi](#) examines some popular rituals and festivals celebrated in different parts of India. Finally, [Devi And Women](#) ponders over why the worship of a powerful, empowered Goddess, does not lead to the automatic empowerment of Hindu women.

◀ previous section

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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[◀ homepage](#)

Tantric Devi Series



Between 1660-1670, an unknown master in the Punjab hills of northern India painted a magnificent series of some seventy paintings which visualize Devi in expressive forms of strength and beauty. Only thirty-two of the original group have survived, of which six, with their accompanying verses, are exhibited here. This series is known as the [Tantric Devi](#) series because the imagery suggests an affiliation with esoteric rites of [tantric](#) worship.


[◀ previous section](#)
[next ▶](#)
[| Devi Homepage | Text Only |](#)
[| Who is Devi | Aspects of Devi | Interpreting Devi | Tantric Devi | For Kids | Resources |](#)
[| Sackler Homepage | Acknowledgements |](#)

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Vasudhara: Goddess of Abundance

This Devi is Vasudhara, the goddess of wealth and abundance. She is worshiped in Nepal in the Himalaya Mountains by Buddhists, followers of a wise man named Buddha who lived in India over two thousand years ago. Vasudhara has the power to give good things.

She has six hands. In four of them, she holds four precious symbols: a book of knowledge, a sheaf of grain, an auspicious water-filled vessel, and a cluster of jewels. On her head is a towering ceremonial crown with five miniature Buddhas.



When you look at Vasudhara, here are some questions you might want to discuss with your family, teachers, and friends:

1. How are goddesses superhuman?
2. Why does Vasudhara have six hands?
3. What is she holding in her hands?

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Sources for further information

Come and visit *Devi The Great Goddess*, an exhibition at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery from March 28 - September 6, 1999.

A catalogue that explores the many aspects of *Devi* has been published in conjunction with the exhibition. *Devi The Great Goddess: Female Divinity in South Asian Art*, Vidya Dehejia, editor. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1999. (The catalogue may be ordered through the Museum Shop. Order information is available on the web site for the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, www.si.edu/asia).

The web sites listed for each organization below include links to other resources for the arts and cultures of South Asia.

["Education About Asia"](#)

Association for Asian Studies, Inc.

1021 East Huron Street

Ann Arbor, MI 48104

<http://www.aasianst.org>

Telephone: 734-665-2490

Fax: 734-665-3801

A biannual magazine designed as a resource for teachers at all educational levels. It offers feature articles, essays on educational programs and techniques, reviews of books, films, videos, websites and software. Subscription available through the Association for Asian Studies

Selected Museums

[Asian Art Museum of San Francisco](#)

Education Department

Golden Gate State Park

San Francisco, CA 94118

<http://www.asianart.org>

Telephone: 415-668-8921

Fax: 415-668-8928

[Denver Art Museum](#)

100 W. 14th Avenue Parkway

Denver, CO 80204

<http://www.denverartmuseum.org>

Telephone: 303-640-4433

[Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#)

5905 Wilshire Boulevard

Los Angeles, CA 90036

<http://lacma.org>

Telephone: 323-857-3000

[Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

Uris Library and Resource Center

1000 Fifth Avenue

New York, NY 10028

Telephone: 212-650-2756

Fax: 212-570-3972

<http://www.metmuseum.org>

[Seattle Asian Art Museum](#)

1400 E. Prospect Street

Volunteer Park

Seattle, WA 98112

(Mailing address: P. O. Box 22000, Seattle, WA 98122)

<http://www.seattleartmuseum.org>

Telephone: 206-654-3255

Selected Centers and Educational Services

[Asian Educational Media Service](#)

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

230 International Studies Building, MC-483

910 South Fifth Street

Champaign, IL 61820

<http://aema.uiuc.edu>

Telephone: 217-265-0640

Fax: 217-265-0641

AEMS offers information about where to find materials. On the web site you will find a searchable database with an array of educational media dealing with Asia.

[Asia Society](#)

725 Park Avenue

New York, NY 10021

Contact: Education Department

<http://www.asiasociety.org>

Telephone: 212-288-6400

Fax: 212-517-8315

(See <http://www.askasia.org/frclasrm/lessplan> and click on 1000055 for a lesson plan on "Images of the Goddess of India.")

[Association for Asian Studies](#)

1021 East Huron Street
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
Telephone: 734-665-2490
Fax: 734-665-3801
<http://www.aasianst.org>

[Center for Asian Studies](#)

University of Texas at Austin
WCH 4.134 (G9300)
Austin, TX 78712
<http://asnic.utexas.edu>
Telephone: 512-471-5811
Fax: 512-471-4469

[Center for South Asia](#)

115 Observatory Drive. #203
Madison, WI 53706
<http://www.wisc.edu>
Telephone: 608-262-4884
Fax: 608-265-3062
Documentary film collection includes a series of videos on the Goddess.

[Center for South Asian Studies](#)

University of California at Berkeley
10 Stephens Hall, #2310
Berkeley, CA 94720
<http://www.ias.berkeley.edu/SouthAsia>
Telephone: 510-642-3608
Fax: 510-643-5793

[Center for South Asian Studies](#)

Jackson School of International Studies
303 Thompson Hall
University of Washington, DR-05
Seattle, WA 98195
<http://weber.u.washington.edu/~sascuw>
Telephone: 206-543-4800
Fax: 206-685-0668

[Center for South Asian Studies](#)

University of Virginia
110 Minor Hall
Charlottesville, VA 22903
<http://virginia.edu/~soasia>
Telephone: 804-924-8815

[Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies](#)

University of Michigan
1080 S. University Ave.
Suite 3640
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
<http://www.umich.edu/~iinet/csseas>
Telephone: 734-764-0352
Fax: 734-936-0996

[South Asia Center](#)

Syracuse University
346G Eggers Hall
The Maxwell School
Syracuse, NY 13244
<http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/gai/south-asia-center>
Telephone: 315-443-2553
Fax: 315-443-9085

[South Asia Program](#)

Cornell University
170 Uris Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853
<http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/SouthAsia>
Telephone: 607-255-8493

[South Asia Regional Studies](#)

University of Pennsylvania
(no address available, contact rcohen@mail.sas.upenn.edu for further information)
<http://southasia.upenn.edu/html/center.html>

[Southern Asian Institute](#)

Columbia University
420 W. 118th St.
New York, NY 10027
<http://www.cc.columbia.edu/cu/sipa/REGIONAL/SAI>
Telephone: 212-854-3616

 [previous section](#)

[next section](#) 

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Project Director:

Lucia Buchanan Pierce

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Smithsonian Institution

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Martha Burk director.

c. 1999, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. This website was made possible the Smithsonian Educational Outreach Fund. The exhibition, *Devi: The Great Goddess*, was made possible by generous grants from Enron/Enron Oil & Gas International, the Rockefeller Foundation, The Starr Foundation, Hughes Network Systems, and the ILA Foundation, Chicago.

I am enormously indebted to Vidya Dehejia, Associate Director and Chief Curator of the Freer and Sackler Galleries, curator of *Devi: The Great Goddess*, and editor and author of a volume of the same title from which I have drawn extensively. I would also like to thank Michael Edson, Amita Sarin, John Tsantes, and Frances Yeh from the Freer and Sackler Galleries for their assistance.

Lucia Pierce

Education Department

Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Markama

India, state of Orissa, Rayagada district, spring 1997. Photo by Cornelia Mallebrein.

The goddess Markama in the sanctum of her temple in Bissamcuttack, where she is represented by a natural boulder. The goddess's face is covered with red powder and is decorated with silver eye, tongue, and nose, as well as a diadem. There are seven swords placed on the stone image; one belongs to Markama's spouse, Niamraja, a deity of the Dongaria Kondh tribe.

[Return](#)



देवी devi

◀ homepage

aspects of devi ▶

cosmic force

○ durga

○ kali

○ creation



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Dancing Devi. Lent by the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

Cosmic Force

As cosmic force Devi creates, annihilates, and recreates the universe. Of awesome appearance, she destroys demonic forces that threaten world equilibrium wielding weapons in multiple arms that testify to her ability to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. This category includes her form as Durga, slayer of the buffalo demon; black Kali; the emaciated Chamunda; and Devi herself.

◀ previous

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Dancing Devi

India, state of Rajasthan, Bikaner, ca. 1725.
Opaque and transparent watercolor, ink, and
silver on paper. Lent by the Metropolitan
Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1996.

In this elegant and restrained drawing from the desert kingdom of Bikaner in the state of Rajasthan, the Great Goddess executes a graceful dance upon a lotus. The rounded contours of her gown, its pattern of delicate leaves and flowers, and the lazy droop of the full lotus leaves evoke aspects of the goddess connected with fertility and abundance. Her many weapons, rendered in silver paint, remind us of her extraordinary powers. This large drawing was apparently envisioned to serve as an individual image and not be included in a narrative manuscript.

[Return](#)



देवी devi

◀ homepage

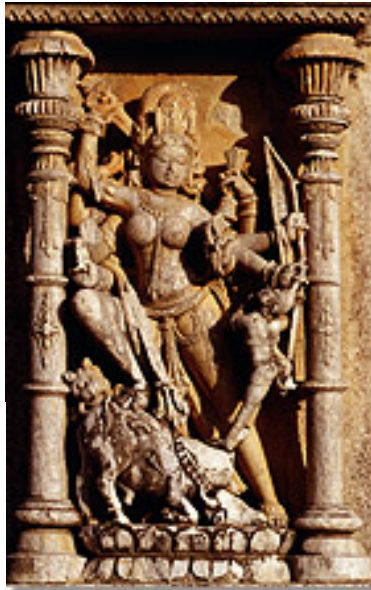
aspects of devi ▲

cosmic force

● durga

○ kali

○ creation



[Full image and description.](#)

Devi Slaying the Buffalo. Photo by Neil Greentree.

Durga

Durga, the great Warrior Goddess, represents the lethal energy of divine anger when turned against evil. It is Durga's story which is told in the three great legends in ► [Devi Mahatmya](#). 📖 The world was under attack by Mahisha, the most evil demon in the world, who took many different forms, including that of a buffalo. The male gods, fearing total annihilation ► [endowed Durga with their powers](#). 📖 Riding a lion into battle, Durga slew the buffalo by cutting off its head and then she destroyed the spirit of the demon as it emerged from the buffalo's severed neck. It is through this act that order was established in the world.




[Full image and description.](#)

At the Hub of Things. Lent by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution.

Durga's victory and power are celebrated every fall throughout India in the ► [Durga Puja](#). 📖 Durga is among the most widely represented visual forms of Devi across the Indian subcontinent. She is seen in stone, bronze, wood, clay, and paint; her image is reintegrated in the contemporary world in oil on canvas and with powdered pigment in fiberglass.



 **previous**

next 



| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[cosmic force](#)
[○ durga](#)
[● kali](#)
[○ creation](#)

[Full image and description.](#)

Chamunda. Lent by the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), General Acquisitions Fund.

Kali

Kali may be said to represent the darker side of Devi's power. Her emergence is chronicled in the third story of the *Devi Mahatmya*. Confronted by the insolent remarks of the demon generals, Chanda and Munda, a fiery burst of energy emerges from Devi's forehead and takes the dark skeletal form of goddess Kali. Kali overpowers and beheads two demon generals, Chanda and Munda, and when she carries their heads to Devi she is named Chamunda. She is often portrayed as emaciated, black, and with a necklace of skulls. (The story continues in which Devi, Kali and a group of matrikas, or mothers, destroy the demon brothers Shumbha and Nishumbha. In the final battle against Shumbha, Devi absorbs Kali and the matrikas and stands alone for the final battle.)


[Full image and description.](#)

Kali Drinks the Blood of Raktabija. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John Gilmore Ford.

During a fierce battle in which the Great Goddess demonstrates her omnipotence by defeating powerful demons who terrify even the gods, she encounters the fierce Raktabija. Every drop of blood he sheds turns into another demon as it touches the earth. A unique strategy has to be devised to contain him. Devi asks Kali to step in and contain the demon. With her huge mouth and enormous tongue she ferociously laps up Raktabija's blood, thus preventing the uprising of further demons.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)



| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[cosmic force](#)
[○ durga](#)
[○ kali](#)
[● creation](#)

[Full image and description.](#)

Vishnu reclining on his serpent who floats on the cosmic waters.
Photo by Barbara Wagner.

Creation

The first story of the *Devi Mahatmya* shows Devi in her universal form as shakti (literally energy or power). This is the most abstract way of defining or naming the Great Goddess. Here Devi is central to the creation myth; she is the power that induces the god Vishnu's deep slumber on the waters of the cosmic ocean prior to the creation of the world which is a continuous cycle of creation, destruction and recreation. Vishnu lies on his serpent that is coiled in the form of a couch. Two demons arise from Vishnu's sleeping body and set out to slay Brahma who is preparing to create the next cycle of the universe. Brahma sings to the Great Goddess, asking her to withdraw from Vishnu so he can waken and slay the demons. Devi agrees to withdraw and Vishnu wakes and kills the demons. Here Devi serves as the agent who allows the cosmic order to be restored to the world. This is the first story told in the *Devi Mahatmya*. However, this tale has rarely inspired artistic creations, perhaps because Devi's role is one of quiet withdrawal rather than dynamic action.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[dayini](#)

- lakshmi
- sarasvati
- parvati
- ganga & vasudhara
- tara & ambika


[Full image and description.](#)

Parvati. Lent by a private collection.

Dayini

As *dayini*, gracious donor of boons, she blesses devotees with wealth, fortune, and success. She is a gentle, radiant figure who attends to the daily needs of those who adore her. The first appearance of female divinities was in the guise of *dayini*, the gentle and beneficent fulfiller of the desires of devotees, a role which remains one of enduring strength and attraction. *Dayinis* take many and varied guises within the Hindu religion, and they also penetrate the Buddhist and Jain faiths which arose around the fifth century B.C. Here we see Devi as Lakshmi, Sarasvati, the river goddess Ganga, Vasudhara, the Buddhist goddess Tara, and the Jain goddess Ambika.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)
[| Devi Homepage | Text Only |](#)
[| Who is Devi | Aspects of Devi | Interpreting Devi | Tantric Devi | For Kids | Resources |](#)
[| Sackler Homepage | Acknowledgements |](#)

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Parvati.

India, state of Tamil Nadu, Chola period, ca 1100.
Bronze. Lent by a private collection.

Parvati's exquisite smiling face welcomes worshipers who would never have seen her as she appears here. In a temple setting, she would have been draped with silks, adorned with gold and gem-studded jewels and multiple garlands of flowers that would have totally concealed the lines of the sculpture. This bronze is a festival icon carried in procession during every temple festival. The double lotus upon which the goddess stands would have been inset into a rectangular pedestal with holes through it or with lugs attached so that inserted poles could rest on the shoulders of temple officers who carried the image.

[Return](#)



देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[dayini](#)

- lakshmi
- sarasvati
- parvati
- ganga & vasudhara
- tara & ambika



[Full image and description.](#)
Lakshmi Poster.

Lakshmi

Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is worshiped by householders for the health and welfare of their families; business men and women offer her prayers to ensure the success of their endeavors. She is frequently shown standing in her lotus throne and holding lotus buds, which are symbols of beauty and fertility. Lakshmi, a goddess in her own right, is also the wife of the Vishnu and as Vishnu has nine reincarnations, so does Lakshmi. The two most popular forms of Vishnu and Lakshmi's reincarnations are Rama and Sita (whose story is told in the Ramayana) and Krishna and Radha. Sita and Radha also appear as another aspect of Devi, that of Heroine and Beloved.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[dayini](#)

- lakshmi
- sarasvati
- parvati
- ganga & vasudhara
- tara & ambika


[Full image and description.](#)

Jain goddess Sarasvati. Lent by the
[Los Angeles County Museum of Art.](#)

Sarasvati

Sarasvati, goddess of learning and music, emerged as early as 1300 B.C. as Vach. Vach was considered both speech itself and the goddess of speech. Later, when transformed into the goddess of learning and music, she acquired her name and a swan as her vehicle. Hindus consider her to be the consort of the god Brahma.


[Full image and description.](#)

Sarasvati. Lent by the Victoria and
Albert Museum.

Buddhist and Jains, whose faith places emphasis on knowledge as the means to liberation, also worship Sarasvati. She is commonly depicted seated on a lotus holding a stringed instrument, the Vina. Devotees, particularly children starting school, and students of all ages, worship Sarasvati as the source of knowledge. As the goddess of music she is particularly sacred to those who sing or play musical instruments.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[dayini](#)

- ◉ lakshmi
- ◉ sarasvati
- parvati
- ◉ ganga & vasudhara
- ◉ tara & ambika


[Full image and description.](#)

Parvati and Ganesha. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John Gilmore Ford.

Parvati

Parvati is the consort of the god Shiva. She is constantly beside Shiva, watching him as he dances the dance of bliss, admiring him in his deeds of annihilation, joining him in games of dice or playing with their two sons, the elephant headed Ganesha and the warrior Skanda. Shiva and Parvati, whose love is deep and abiding, represent the paradigmatic divine family. Shiva and Parvati are often united in a single form known as Ardhanari (literally half woman) to represent the concept that the divine is both male and female.


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Parvati, Lent by a private collection.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[dayini](#)

- lakshmi
- sarasvati
- parvati
- ganga & vasudhara
- tara & ambika



[Full image and description.](#)

River Goddess Ganga on Her Fish Mount. Lent by the San Diego Museum of Art.

Ganga

The concept of water as potent energy in liquid form appears in the sacred Vedic texts that date back to 1300 B.C. By the start of the current era, the rivers Ganges and Yamuna were personified and invoked as life-giving waters. The celestial Ganges came to earth (starting in the Himalayas and flowing into the plains below) so that the cremated ashes of ancestors could be immersed in her waters thus enabling them to attain salvation.



[Full image and description.](#)

Vasudhara, Goddess of Abundance. Private Collection, courtesy Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

Vasudhara

Like her Hindu counterpart, Lakshmi, Vasudhara is the Buddhist goddess of wealth, good fortune and abundance and is one of the most popular household deities of Nepal. Devotees appeal to her for earthly riches and for fertility of the field and womb. This six-armed goddess holds four precious, life-sustaining symbols: a book of knowledge, a sheaf of grain, an auspicious water-filled vessel, and a cluster of jewels.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[dayini](#)

- lakshmi
- sarasvati
- parvati
- ganga & vasudhara
- tara & ambika


[Full image and description.](#)

Tara the Savioreess. Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Tara

One of the most popular goddess among Buddhists is Tara who is adored for protection from evil and to overcome obstacles. Her name is derived from the verb *tara*, meaning "to cross," for she enables the devotee to cross the ocean of existence. Supplicants chiefly approach Tara for protection, but also make requests for material benefits.


[Full image and description.](#)

Ambika. Lent by Dr. Siddharth Bhansali.

Ambika

Goddesses were first introduced into the Jain faith as attendant deities of the twenty-four liberators known as Jinas. Of these Ambika (Mother Dear), is associated with the mango tree and its fruit and is always portrayed with one or both of her sons. She is worshiped on behalf of mothers and infants.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

◀ homepage

aspects of devi ▲

heroine

○ sita

○ draupadi

○ radha



[Full image and description.](#)

Radha and Krishna Dressed in Each Other's Clothes (Lilahava). Lent by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Heroine

As heroine and beloved, Devi comes down to earth and her exemplary life provides an inspiring model for women. Devotees admire and adore these manifestations of Devi because of the greatness of their personal sacrifice and commitment to moral obligation; their portrayal of courage, and outspokenness; or their disregard of social norms in the face of overwhelming love.

◀ previous

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Standing with a symmetrical landscape of yellow flowering creepers emerging from the greenery of trees, Radha, holding Krishna's flute, has donned her divine lover's peacock-feather crown and saffron-colored dhoti. Blue-complexioned Krishna, in turn, wears Radha's earrings, red skirt, blouse, and transparent shawl. Holding hands, the two gaze into one another's eyes.

This unique visual motif of the clothing exchange serves as a metaphor for Radha and Krishna's shared essence. Radha's and Krishna's donning of each other's garments signifies that the two are identical, as is suggested in this verse by an unknown poet.

*She wears his peacock feather,
he dons her lovely, delicate crown;
She sports his yellow garment,
he wraps himself in her beautiful sari
How charming the very sight of it. . .
The daughter of Vrsabhanu [Radha] turns
[into] Nanda's son [Krishna],
and Nanda's son, Vrsabhanu's girl.
(Srivasta Goswami, trans. *The Divine Consort*, 87)*

[Return](#)



Radha and Krishna Dressed in Each Other's Clothes (Lilahava).

India, Punjab Hills, Kangra, 18th century. Opaque watercolor on paper. Lent by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Don and Corky Whitaker.

देवी devi

◀ homepage

aspects of devi ▶

heroine

● sita

○ draupadi

○ radha



[Full image and description.](#)

The Sage's Wife Clothes Sita. Lent by the San Diego Museum of Art.



[Full image and description.](#)

Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana in the Forest. Lent by the San Diego Museum of Art.

Sita

Sita, heroine of the *Ramayana* epic, faithfully followed her husband Prince Rama (an incarnation of the god Vishnu) into exile. She has been lauded through the ages as the ideal wife. Abducted by the demon king Ravana and imprisoned for months in his palace before she is finally freed by Rama, she must prove her purity by entering blazing flames from which Agni, god of fire, delivers her intact to Rama. Sita is upheld as the model of wifely love and adherence to duty.

◀ previous

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[heroine](#)
[○ sita](#)
[● draupadi](#)
[○ radha](#)

[Full image and description.](#)

The Disrobing of Draupadi. Lent by the Howard Hodgkin Collection, London.

Draupadi

Draupadi, heroine of the *Mahabharata* epic, is bold and forthright even in adversity. Her husband Yudhisthira succumbing to his weakness for gambling, stakes and loses all (in a rigged game), including his wife. Draupadi challenges the assembly and demands to know how it is possible for one who has staked and lost his own self to retain the right to wager her.


[Full image and description.](#)

Draupadi and Ashvatthaman. Lent by a private collection.

Duryodhana, the winner of the bet, insists that Draupadi is indeed his to do with as he pleases and orders that she be disrobed. Furious at this insult to her honor, Draupadi loosens her coifed hair and vows that she will not knot it again until she has washed it in Duryodhana's blood. As she is disrobed, the more her sari is pulled away the longer it becomes. It is this event which turns Draupadi from a contented, but strong willed wife into a vengeful goddess.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)
[| Devi Homepage | Text Only |](#)
[| Who is Devi | Aspects of Devi | Interpreting Devi | Tantric Devi | For Kids | Resources |](#)
[| Sackler Homepage | Acknowledgements |](#)

The Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560.
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देवी devi

◀ homepage

aspects of devi ▶

heroine

- sita
- draupadi
- radha



[Full image and description.](#)

Lotus-Clad Radha and Krishna. Lent by the Gursharan and Elvira Sidhu Collection.

Radha

The third influential heroine and beloved is Radha, a cowherdess whose story is narrated in the twelfth-century poem, *Gita Govinda* (Love Song of the Dark Lord). Having once experienced the ecstasy of divine love with Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu), Radha is separated from Krishna and yearns with single-minded intensity for reunion. In the *Gita Govinda* Radha is human and Krishna divine, and the poem is interpreted metaphorically in terms of the longing of the human soul for the divine. The final reunion symbolizes the bliss of salvation. By the sixteenth century, Radha was transformed into a goddess, and is honored as the heavenly queen of Krishna's celestial world.



[Full image and description.](#)

Radha and Krishna Entwined. Lent by Leo S. Figiel, M.D.

◀ previous

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

◀ homepage

aspects of devi ▶

local protector

◯ tribal

◯ bhuta



[Full image and description.](#)

Seven sisters on a pedestal.
Lent by Leo S. Figiel, M.D.



[Full image and description.](#)

Durga beneath a Sunburst
Medallion. Lent by Leo S. Figiel,
M.D.

Local Protector

As local protector of villages and towns and individual tribal peoples, Devi encompasses local goddesses as well as local variations on the Great Goddess whose aspect as cosmic force have already been noted. The Indian countryside is dotted with numerous wayside shrines that are often located at the threshold of villages. Except for those dedicated to local heroes these shrines are invariably "mata" or mother goddess shrines. Sometimes a "mata" shrine encloses nothing more than an earthen water pot with molded clay protrusions that symbolize the nourishing breasts of the goddess.

At other times, a rock smeared with saffron and vermillion speaks of her presence. On occasion, a simply modeled stone image serves to invoke the deity. These goddesses, who are concerned only with local affairs, are all-important in the villages and tribal areas. They give an immediacy to worship that cannot be provided by the great male gods, Vishnu and Shiva, who are usually enshrined in temples in the major towns.



[Full image and description](#)

A household shrine of the goddess
Renuka. Photo by Cornelia



◀ previous

next ▶



| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Seven female figures representing the seven sisters (*sat-bahini*) here stand in a row, their arms wrapped around one another's backs in folk-dance formation. Since prehistoric times the number seven has had mystical significance in India. It denotes multiplicity and plurality and is widely associated with cyclic renewal. In western India groups of seven water nymphs are propitiated to protect women from infertility and miscarriages.



Seven sisters on a pedestal

India, state of Madhya Pradesh, Bastar district, 19th century. Bronze. Lent by Leo S. Figiel, M.D.

In southern India, the *sapta kannagis* (seven maidens) are considered the tutelary deities of water tanks. In tribal Bastar, where young people often live in dormitories called *ghotul*, the seven sisters are looked upon as protectors of adolescent girls. The divine maidens have individual names, which are often conferred as titles of honor upon the resident girls. These bronze figurines depicting the seven divine maidens may also refer to the girls engaged in ritual dances in their honor.

[Return](#)

देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[local protector](#)

tribal
bhuta


[Full image and description.](#)

Durga with Her Family. Lent by Leo S. Figiel. M. D.

Tribal

The fluctuating imagery of local goddesses is dramatically exemplified in the tribal region of Bastar in central India, where bronze casters create images from personal dream visions of the deities. With such an individual approach, only the craftsman and the commissioning patron know a deity's precise identity. A favored Bastar mode for representing goddesses is to model them seated upon a swing or within wheeled chariots.


[Full image and description.](#)

Woman with parasol and pot. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

Sculptures often represent different aspects of tribal life. The bronze, on the left, is from the Kondh tribe. The woman bears distinctive tattoo marks on cheeks, chin, and forehead, as well as multiple piercings of the earlobes. As a preparation for marriage, Kondh girls are tattooed at the age of ten, while even earlier, holes are pierced along the outer ear and earlobes to receive the earrings their bridegroom will one day give them.

Sculptors who make images for the traditional temples work according to textual prescriptions following strict guidelines for the physical proportions of deities, their adornment, and other iconographic details. Folk artisans are unfettered by any such regulations. Their work, believed to be inspired directly by the deities who appear in their dream visions, renders each piece unique.



[Full image and description.](#)

Elongated goddess. Lent by Leo S. Figiel, M. D.

◀ previous

next ▶



| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

The Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560.
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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[local protector](#)
[tribal](#)
[● bhuta](#)

[Full image and description.](#)

Female bhuta. Lent by Dr. Siddharth Bhansali.

Bhuta

A different type of visual representation and its accompanying belief is evident in the unique Bhuta cult practiced along India's southwestern coastal strip. The term "bhuta" refers to a group of divine spirits or supernatural beings who are generally benign but are also capable of causing misery unless they receive periodic propitiation and worship. Local people refer to bhutas with awe and veneration.


[Full image and description.](#)

Female bhuta. Lent by Dr. Siddharth Bhansali.

Close to four hundred individual bhutas are recognized of which a large number are female, referred to as Mothers. The goddess Chikka (literally, small one), a petite, demure figure is reportedly today's favorite bhuta. She is often ornamented with her hair drawn to one side as a ponytail, and her strikingly stylized facial features gives her an air of austere grandeur. A bowl of sacred ash, known as *vibhuti*, often rests in her upraised hand.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Durga beneath a Sunburst Medallion.

India, state of Himachal Pradesh, Kullu. 16th century. Bronze. Lent by Leo S. Figiel, M. D.

Beneath a large sunburst medallion, a triumphant four-armed Durga stands over a decapitated buffalo. The zigzag shaft of her trident simulates a thunderbolt as it pierces the buffalo at her feet while her other hand holds the wretched demon Mahisha. An incongruously small lion attacks the buffalo's rear. This vigorous rendition of Durga with a disproportionately large head and short skirt is typical of the folk style of Himachal Pradesh in northern India. The large number of Durga images from this region are testimony to the high regard in which she is held.

[Return](#)



A household shrine of the goddess Renuka.
A decorated stone with a silver crown
represents the goddess. India, state of
Maharashtra, Nanded district, Mahur, 1992.
Photo by Cornelia Mallebrein.

[Return](#)



देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[semi divine](#)

[○ nagini](#)
[○ sundari](#)
[Full image and description.](#)

Sundari beneath the Mango Tree. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John Gilmore Ford.

Semi-Divine

As semi-divine and auspicious, Devi manifests through nature and fertility spirits, celestial nymphs, and auspicious women. Women are considered auspicious through their association with fertility which signifies growth, abundance, and prosperity. This association led to a belief that contact with women brings trees, plants, and creepers into blossom. The *ashoka* tree, popularly associated with the flowering of a woman's foot, is celebrated repeatedly in Sanskrit poems and dramas.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Sundari beneath the Mango Tree.

India, state of Madhya Pradesh or southern Uttar Pradesh, mid-9th century. Sandstone. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John Gilmore Ford.

Poised beneath a mango tree this exquisite sundari (beauty) ignores the monkey perched on the branch above and reaches up with her right arm to bring down a cluster of ripe fruit into her raised, now-damaged, left hand. According to ancient lore, the sound of a woman's laughter was all that was needed to induce the mango tree to blossom and bear fruit. This figure speaks of the importance of the theme of woman in ancient India where her presence was believed to confer auspiciousness on any monument. The image emphasized the importance of the feminine, given its associations with the bearing and rearing of children. The female figure was an obvious emblem of fertility and thereby of growth, abundance, and prosperity, hence it was a short step to visualize her as a symbol of all that is auspicious. Carved as a decorative bracket to connect a pillar with the ceiling, this sundari graced the interior of a temple with her auspicious presence. As devotees glanced upward, their gaze would have met at least four such sundaris, creating a joyous atmosphere within the sacred precincts.

[Return](#)



देवी devi

◀ homepage

aspects of devi ▶

semi divine

● nagini

○ sundari



[Full image and description.](#)

Nagini. Lent by the collection of Anupam and Rajika Puri.

Nagini

Snake beings, believed to be auspicious, are worshiped throughout India as divinities who provide protection from dangers, including snake bites. Female snake beings, known as *nagini*, are portrayed as lovely women with a serpent head or backed by serpent coils.

◀ previous

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[semi divine](#)

[○ nagini](#)
[● sundari](#)
[Full image and description.](#)

Sundari beneath the Mango Tree. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John Gilmore Ford.

Sundari

According to ancient lore, the sound of a woman's laughter was all that was needed to induce trees to blossom or to bear fruit. Often images of *sundari* (beauty) emphasize the association of woman with the bearing and rearing of children. The female figure is an obvious emblem of fertility and thereby of growth, abundance, and prosperity. From this, it was a short step to woman becoming an emblem of the auspicious.

The auspiciousness associated with images of women is believed to be transferred to the monument upon which they are sculpted or painted. A royal palace, a Buddhist stupa, or a Hindu or Jain shrine gains in fortune and prosperity when adorned with the figures of women.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[woman saints](#)
[◉ karaikkal ammai](#)
[◉ saint andal](#)

[Full image and description.](#)

Yogini with Disciple. Lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Woman Saints

India is a land of holy persons (one could call them living saints) who have abandoned home and family to wander the land seeking alms to maintain themselves. Because the ideal role assigned to women is that of wife and mother there are few women saints. Yet those who have made their mark as women saints are accorded honor and even deified. Women are also accepted as *yoginis* (adepts at yoga), a physical and spiritual discipline from which they are believed to acquire extraordinary powers. Thus, Devi can also be manifested as woman saints, born on earth but endowed with deep spirituality and other-worldly powers.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Yogini with Disciple

India, state of West Bengal, Murshidabad, 18th century. Opaque watercolor on paper. Lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum.

In a peaceful remote hermitage, a disciple plays a double-gourded vina for her female guru, who listens attentively to the music with a yoga band around her knees that enables her to retain this yogic posture for long periods. A peacock-feather fly whisk, an attribute of *yoginis*, lies at her side. Both *yoginis* wear the salmon-colored robes, *rudraksha* beaded necklaces, and large earrings (*darshani*) that are characteristic of ascetics of the Nath sectarian order.

The subdued colors and the sparse composition communicate effectively the peaceful atmosphere of the *yoginis* retreat. A sandy plain between the silver-gray river and the sky, a simple white hut, and the restrained postures of the two women further enhance the mood of tranquility. This painting was produced in the provincial court of Murshidabad, which rose to power in the eighteenth century, asserting its independence from Mughal rule in Delhi.

[Return](#)



देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[aspects of devi ▶](#)
[woman saints](#)
[● karaikkal ammaiya](#)
[○ saint andal](#)

[Full image and description.](#)

Seated Saint Karaikkal Ammaiya. Lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Karaikkal Ammaiya

Prime among women saints from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, is Karaikkal Ammaiya who lived in the 6th century. When the young and beautiful woman, who lived in the town of Karaikkal, beseeched the god Shiva to divest her of the burden of her flesh, asking only that she watch him dance into eternity, a miracle occurred. In place of the young woman stood an emaciated hag, known from henceforth as Mother of Karaikkal (Karaikkal Ammaiya). From then on, she wrote [poetry in praise of Shiva](#) 📖.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

◀ homepage

aspects of devi ▲

woman saints

○ karaikkal ammai

● saint andal



[Full image and description.](#)

Saint Andal. Lent by a private collection.

Saint Andal

Saint Andal, a devotee of the god Vishnu, lived in southern India around the year 800. Andal wrote [poetry full of longing for Vishnu](#). Andal, along with Karaikkal Ammai, are two of the few women saints honored as images in temples.

◀ previous

next section ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Who is Devi

The Great Goddess, known in India as Devi (literally "goddess"), has many guises. She is "Ma" the gentle and approachable mother. As Jaganmata, or Mother of the universe, she assumes cosmic proportions, destroying evil and addressing herself to the creation and dissolution of the worlds. She is worshiped by thousands of names that often reflect local customs and legends. She is one and she is many. She is celebrated in songs and poems.

"Always Blissful Mother," by Kamlalakanta Chakrabarti

Mother, you're always blissful.

You charmed destructive Shiva,

you dance in your own joy,

and clap your hands to keep time.

O Elemental, Eternal One!

Your form is empty space,

yet the moon adorns your brow.

Where did you get your garland of severed heads,

before the universe came into being?

You are the operator,

and we nothing but machines

that run by your rule.

We stay where you put us,

and say what you make us say.

Cursing you, O Destructive One,

restless Kamlalakanta says:

With the sword in your hand

you've slaughtered my faith

together with my disbelief.

Devi is all-important in the Hindu tradition, but there are also forms of female divinity in the Buddhist and Jain religions. Today millions of Hindu men and women conduct regular pujas to Devi through one of her many manifestations. For some she is their primary deity while for others she is part of a greater pantheon. All Hindu goddesses can be seen as different manifestations of Devi. In some forms she is benign and gentle, while in other forms she is dynamic and ferocious, but in all forms she is helpful to her devotees.

[DEFINITION: Hinduism is a fusion of many religious beliefs and philosophical schools Its origins are mixed and complex: one strand is traced to the Vedas, the sacred literature written around 1100 BC by the Aryans, a people who trickled steadily into the Indian subcontinent between 1800 and 1200 BC; the other strand drew upon the beliefs of the indigenous people of India especially their faith in the efficacy of fertility symbols and faith in the power of the Mother Goddess.]

[DEFINITION: Buddhism, a faith that originated in India about 2,500 years ago, embodies the teachings of the Buddha. He devised a code of actions and thoughts to free humankind from a continual state of desire and egotism. Jainism is a faith that originated in India in the fifth century B.C. which considered knowledge to be the ultimate way to salvation.]

[DEFINITION: Puja is the act of showing reverence to a god, a spirit, or another aspect of the divine through invocations, prayers, songs and rituals.]

[IMAGE: Parvati. India, state of Tamil Nadu, Chola period, ca 1100. Bronze. Lent by a private collection. Created around the year 1100, this majestic bronze of goddess Parvati, consort of god Shiva, stands in an elegant posture with one hand extended and the other raised to hold a flower. She is adorned with multiple strands of necklaces, a simple sacred thread that rests between her breasts, and characteristic armlets and bangles. Her elegantly draped skirt, which clings closely to the contours of her limbs, rests low on her hips and is held in place by a multi strand girdle. Devotees approach Parvati in this gentle form to ask her to confer general benediction and fortune upon them. Parvati's exquisite smiling face welcomes worshipers who would never have seen her as she appears here. In a temple setting, she would have been draped with silks, adorned with gold and gem-studded jewels and multiple garlands of flowers that would have totally concealed the lines of the sculpture. This bronze is a festival icon carried in procession during every temple festival. The double lotus upon which the goddess stands would have been inset into a rectangular pedestal with holes through it or with lugs attached so that inserted poles could rest on the shoulders of temple officers who carried the image.]

[IMAGE: Dancing Bhadrakali Adored by the Gods. Folio 45 from the Tantric Devi series. India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1660-70. Opaque watercolor, gold, silver, and beetle-wing cases on paper (border restored). Lent by a private collection on loan to Museum Rietberg, Zurich.

"Dancing Bhadrakali Adored by the Gods"
Praised by Brahma, Madhava, Sharva, Indra
hailed by the three worlds
with laughing face
intoxicated by drinking wine and blood
she dances with delight
Once again she drinks wine--
reveling in the musical sound of her vina
she sings joyously--
once again she drinks wine
I meditate upon Bhadrakali
with the seed mantra bhaim.

Manifestations of Devi are celebrated and worshiped throughout India. While there are gods and goddesses universally worshiped in India, nearly every Hindu community has its own specific deity which governs its existence. Usually that deity is a goddess as it is always the goddess who protects a village or town and its inhabitants.

The traditional Western formulation of the Hindu trinity in which Brahma is the creator, Vishnu is the preserver and Shiva is the destroyer, observes the Hindu world on the Judeo-Christian model. Brahma is of lesser significance as he cannot act until Vishnu gives him authority to do so. The three dynamic deities are Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi, each of whom encompasses all three divine functions of creation, preservation, and destruction.

[DEFINITION: The god Vishnu is viewed as a savior who has been reborn on earth many times to conquer and balance evil. In each reincarnation, Vishnu is accompanied by an incarnation of his wife Lakshmi.]

[DEFINITION: The god Shiva is both the creator and the destroyer. He is frequently depicted with his wife Parvati, who also has numerous traits.]

[IMAGE: Mohra of Devi. India, state of Himachal Pradesh, 8th or 9th century. Brass. Lent by a private collection. This monumental mask (mohra) of Devi is a super example of the brass mohra tradition in the hills of Himachal Pradesh in northern India. Depictions of Devi and god Shiva in the form of brass or silver mohras are peculiar to the Himalayan regions where until early in this century, wooden masks of deified chieftains were widely worshiped. Groups of mohras are usually secured to chariots and taken out in procession during festivals. However, the extraordinary workmanship of this heavy and unusually large Devi mohra suggests that it was enshrined for worship within an important Himachal temple.]

[IMAGE: Goddess on a swing. India, state of Madhya Pradesh, Bastar district, 19th-20th century. Brass. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Purchase S1990.6 The Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh (central India) has a vast population of tribal people who have retained old customs. The area abounds with female deities, often called matas, or mothers, some of whom are known and venerated only within a single village. Bastar's ritual brasses are either worshiped or given as offering to deities in fulfillment of vows. Here the goddess and swing were cast as one piece that was attached to the supporting structure by twisted wire. Plates on which devotees may burn incense pellets are in her hand, balanced on her head, and placed atop the shrine.]

| [PREVIOUS](#) | [NEXT](#) |

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Procession image of Parvati.
Kapalisvara temple. Mylapur, Chennai.
March 1995.
Photo by Dick Waghorne.

[Return](#)



देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[interpreting devi ▶](#)
[devi through the ages](#)
[epic](#)
[modern](#)

[Full image and description.](#)

Mother goddess figurine. Courtesy of Mark Kenoyer.

Devi Through The Ages

The goddess has been worshiped since prehistoric times in India. This section outlines the evolution of Devi through the ages. Each segment reveals that as Hinduism evolved and changed through the centuries, the roles and functions of Hindu goddesses also went through dramatic changes.


[Full image and description.](#)

Goddess or yakshi. Lent by a private collection.

Goddess worship in India goes back to prehistoric India. Archaeological remains from the cities of the Indus civilization (2600-1900 B.C.) include large numbers of crudely fashioned female clay figurines, generally called mother goddesses.

Starting around 1300 B.C. a group of nomadic peoples who called themselves Aryas, or Noble Ones, became dominant in northern India. Their sacred literature was composed in Sanskrit and known as the Vedas. The

► [Vedas](#) ◀ reflected a world view that was

overwhelmingly masculine. While the male gods became predominant as the Aryans settled in north India, archaeological excavations show that peasants in numerous villages continued to worship the mother goddess.


By the start of the Current Era, three major deities had come to dominate the Hindu religious scene: two male gods, Vishnu and Shiva, and Devi, the Great Goddess. At this time, the goddesses of India slowly emerged from their hibernation and made their presence felt in a significant, if subdued, role as *dayini* (givers). Finely fashioned terra-cotta plaques that featured a female deity were made by skilled artisans, probably for use in the home shrines of wealthy and sophisticated townspeople.



[Full image and description.](#)

Nagini. Lent by the collection of Anupam and Rajika Puri.

 [previous](#)

[next](#) 



| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[interpreting devi ▲](#)
[worshiping devi](#)
[○ festivals](#)

[Full image and description.](#)

Mumba Devi temple. Photo by Neil Greentree.

Worshipping Devi

The rituals surrounding worship of the goddess vary widely throughout India. Goddesses are venerated as consorts of gods and they are worshiped together or in adjacent temples. But goddesses are also worshiped separately, often within shrines of wood, mud and thatch. The importance of visual images of the Great Goddess is emphasized by the context of worship across the Indian subcontinent. Hindu worship is called puja. Puja is the act of showing reverence to a god or goddess through divine invocations, prayers, songs, and rituals.

An essential part of puja is making a spiritual connection with the divine and most often that is facilitated by *darshan*, or "seeing" an image of a god or goddess. *Darshan*, however, is not merely "seeing" but is a dynamic exchange between the devotee and the deity. While the devotee "sees," Devi also presents herself for *darshan* and bestows blessings upon worshipers, who by their act of seeing, have made themselves receptive to the transfer of grace. It is this concept of the dynamic interaction between devotee and Devi that lies at the heart of the creation of images of the Great Goddess and her temples.


[Full image and description.](#)

Sanctum of the Black goddess. Photo by Dick Waghorne.



[Full image and description.](#)

Festival to the goddess
Mariamman. Photo by Dick
Waghorne.

Throughout history, even in areas where worship of the Great Goddess did not gain primacy, her main forms as a wish-bestower, especially Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, and Sarasvati, goddess of learning, have been important. Devi is worshiped as a mother who always desires the well being of her children. Supplicants may request specific help: that a disease be healed, an examination passed, or a job secured.

While some forms of Devi worship are common throughout India, others are regional. Worship of forms such as Draupadi, heroine of the *Mahabharata* and Radha, beloved of Krishna, are restricted to specific geographical locations. Temples and festivals for Draupadi are found in south India, while Radha is celebrated in the north.

◀ previous

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

◀ homepage

interpreting devi ▲

devi and women

Devi and Women

It might seem natural to assume that the presence of so powerful a figure as the Great Goddess must result in the general empowerment of women. However, the secondary status of women in the Indian subcontinent suggests that in practice the adoration of the Great Goddess has had little influence on the position assigned to women (a condition not unique to the subcontinent).



[Full image and description.](#)

Yoginis in a Landscape. Lent by a private collection.

The situation is paradoxical. It is intriguing to note that while Devi is associated with fertility and addressed as "mother," the focus is on Devi as a nurturer, rather than a child-bearer. For example, Lakshmi is addressed as mother of all but she bore no children, neither did Sarasvati. Parvati, consort of Shiva, is mother of the elephant-headed god [Ganesha](#) and the warrior god Skanda, but carried neither in her womb. Thus, Indian goddesses, while worshiped for their powers to grant fertility are not actual role models for Hindu women, whose role in life as a married woman is considered complete only after she has borne children.

While myths surrounding the Great Goddess have not, thus far, been interpreted to serve as empowerment for women, today's generation of women may indeed reinterpret the messages of Devi. As women increasingly adopt leadership roles, they could well appropriate goddess imagery differently from the past and employ the goddess myth to redefine their place in society.



[Full image and description.](#)

Milk pot festival. Photo by Dick Waghorne.

◀ previous

next section ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Dancing Bhadrakali Adored by the Gods

*"Praised by Brahma, Madhava,
Sharva, Indra
hailed by the three worlds
with laughing face
intoxicated by drinking wine and
blood
she dances with delight
Once again she drinks wine--
Reveling in the musical sound of
her vina
she sings joyously--
once again she drinks wine
I meditate upon Bhadrakali
with the seed mantra bhaim."*



Dancing Bhadrakali Adored by the Gods. Folio 45 from the Tantric Devi series. India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1660-70. Opaque watercolor, gold, silver, and beetle-wing cases on paper (border restored). Lent by a private collection on loan to Museum Rietberg, Zurich.

◀ previous

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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intro

slide 1

slide 2

slide 3

slide 4

slide 5

slide 6

The Goddess Worshipped by Rishi Chyavana

*"Her face radiates heat
like that of penance-heated Durga.
Wearing yellow garments
body glowing like a topaz
the four-armed one
sits upon a corpse
in the hermitage of Rishi
Chyavana--
I meditate upon Bhadrakali
with the seed mantra bhaim."*



The Goddess Worshipped by Rishi Chyavana, Freer Gallery of Art, Purchase, F 1997.8.



previous

next section



| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Bhadrakali, Destroyer of the Universe

*"In her lotus like hand she holds
the severed head of the creator of
the world
She smiles and sounds satisfied
She devours the mover of the entire
universe
Like limp darbha* grass
she holds the bodies of
eternally dark Vishnu and Shiva
I meditate upon Bhadrakali
glowing like new clouds
standing upon a corpse."*

(*a type of grass native to India used in
sacred rites.)



Bhadrakali, Destroyer of the Universe. Folio 47 from the Tantric Devi series. India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1660-70. Opaque watercolor, gold, silver, and beetle-wing cases on paper (border restored). Lent by the Howard Hodgkin Collection, London.

◀ previous

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

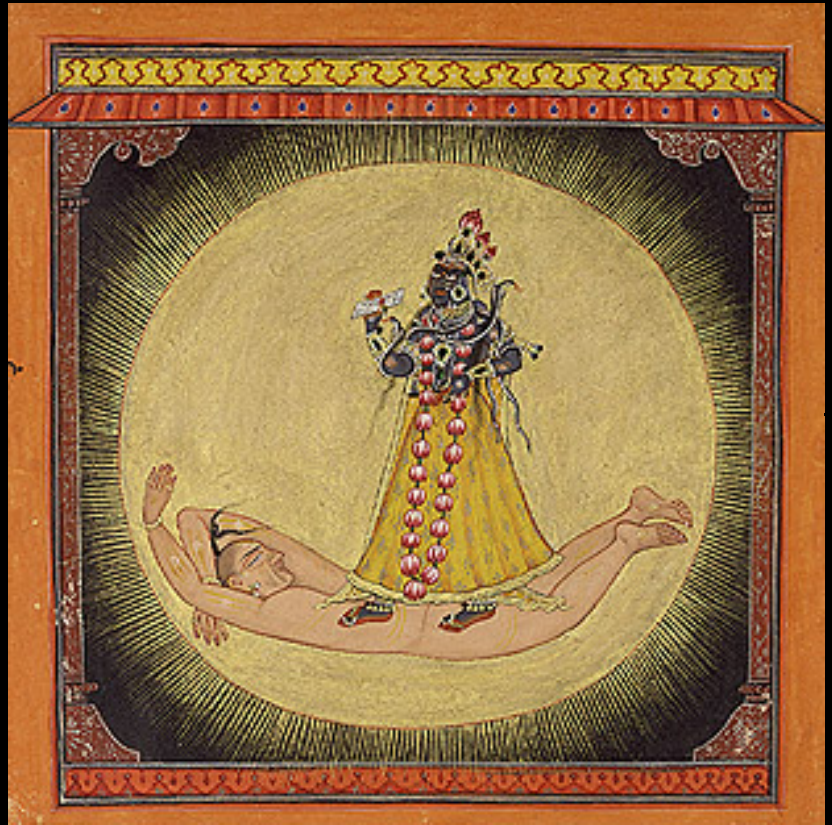
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Bhadrakali within the Rising Sun

*"She loves to reside
in the madala of the rising sun
with a face full as the forest lotus
dark-hued One
with gait graceful as a young swan
breasts high, rounded, and mature
wearing a garland of lotus
blossoms
book in hand
clad in yellow garments
standing upon a corpse
She constantly visits the sacrificial
space
I praise Bhadrakali
with the seed mantra bhaim."*



Bhadrakali within the Rising Sun. Folio 10 from the Tantric Devi series. India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1660-70. Opaque watercolor, gold, silver, and beetle-wing cases on paper. Lent by Dr. Alvin O. Bellak, Philadelphia.

◀ previous

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Varahi Seated on a Tiger

*"Her lotus eyes quiver through
drinking wine
Equal in glory to a thousand suns
Seated upon a lion
with ten arms
In my heart praise Varahi"*



Varahi Seated on a Tiger. Folio 35 from the Tantric Devi series. India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1660-70. Opaque watercolor, gold, and beetle-wing cases on paper.

◀ previous

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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The Gods Pay Homage to Bhadrakali

*"She emerges from the great void
crowned with the crescent moon
face radiant as the full moon
adorned in robes of blue hue.
That Blue One holding a lotus
with a corpse as her seat
is praised by Sharva [Shiva] and
the other gods.
She holds a conch shell, sword,
goad, and noose
flute, club, sharp blade, and knife.
Lotus-eyed One
I praise Bahdrakali
with the seed mantra bhaim."*



The Gods Pay Homage to Bhadrakali, Freer Gallery of Art, Purchase, F1984.42.

◀ previous

next ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Use your observation skills to figure out what these objects might tell us about Devi. (You can find out more about the objects by clicking on the images.)

Devi, the Great Goddess, can represent many accomplishments and many kinds of power. She shows us by taking many different forms. Below are some images of Devi. What accomplishments and power do you think each of them is showing?



[Click for description.](#)

Sarasvati

Consider what she is holding in her many hands.

What are they?

Do they give you clues as to what people want when they pray to Sarasvati?

If you were to choose objects for a god or goddess of learning and music what would they be?

Ganga

Rivers often have their source in mountains. Look at this picture, what is surrounding the water and trees in this picture?

What are the highest and most awe inspiring mountains in the world?

The river Ganges begins in these mountains. Why do you think the goddess Ganga is shown in this setting?

What power might be associated with water?



[Click for description.](#)

Kali

Look at both these pictures, each one shows the goddess Kali. Find the goddess in each of these pictures.



[Click for description.](#)



[Click for description.](#)

Look at both pictures, what words would you use that could apply to both images of Kali? Compare the pictures with each other. In addition to Kali, can you find the gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva in each of the pictures? (A hint: Brahma has many heads, Vishnu is blue, and Shiva has a topknot.)

How would you describe Kali's power in these pictures as compared to the power of the gods? Look at each picture separately, what is Kali's mood in each picture? Even though these pictures might be a little scary, why might a goddess need to be very strong and sometimes destructive?

Stories

When you look at these pictures what are the first words that come to your mind?



[Click for description.](#)



[Click for description.](#)

Tell a friend a story about the three people under the tree; and have a friend tell you a story about the two people dressed in pink looking at each other. Then click on the image to find out what stories the artists were telling.

If you want to find out more about Rama and Sita go to the library and ask for a copy of the *Ramayana* (Story of Rama). There are many versions of this story--enough for all interests!

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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[◀ homepage](#)**FOR KIDS**[for kids ▶](#)

Clearly the Great Goddess Devi can have many forms and many moods! Draw your own goddess. Print out the form below.





Having six arms is a way to show how much you can hold in your hands or how much you can do.

What sort of superhuman powers would you like as a god or goddess?

Draw or paste your own gestures and objects that make you powerful as YOU!

◀ previous

next section ▶

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Aspects of Devi

There are many approaches to looking at Devi: chronological, religious, by function. Here we have chosen to observe Devi by her six main functions, beginning with her most forceful and dynamic form and moving toward increasingly less potent forms. Devi is first seen as a cosmic force, where she creates, annihilates, and recreates the universe, often to destroy demonic forces that threaten world equilibrium. Next, in her gentle, radiant dayini form, she is the gracious donor of boons, wealth, fortune, and success. As heroine and beloved, Devi comes down to earth and provides inspiring models for earthly women. Devi is then seen as a local protector of villages, towns, and individual tribal peoples, where she is concerned only with local affairs. In her fifth form, Devi becomes semi-divine forces, manifesting herself through nature, fertility spirits, and celestial nymphs. Finally, she is also represented in woman saints, who are born on earth but endowed with deep spirituality and other-worldly powers.

Cosmic Force

As cosmic force Devi creates, annihilates, and recreates the universe. Of awesome appearance, she destroys demonic forces that threaten world equilibrium wielding weapons in multiple arms that testify to her ability to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. This category includes her form as Durga, slayer of the buffalo demon; black Kali; the emaciated Chamunda; and Devi herself.

[IMAGE: Dancing Devi. India, state of Rajasthan, Bikaner, ca. 1725. Opaque and transparent watercolor, ink, and silver on paper. Lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1996. In this elegant and restrained drawing from the desert kingdom of Bikaner in the state of Rajasthan, the Great Goddess executes a graceful dance upon a lotus. The rounded contours of her gown, its pattern of delicate leaves and flowers, and the lazy droop of the full lotus leaves evoke aspects of the goddess connected with fertility and abundance. Her many weapons, rendered in silver paint, remind us of her extraordinary powers. This large drawing was apparently envisioned to serve as an individual image and not be included in a narrative manuscript.]

Durga, the great Warrior Goddess, represents the lethal energy of divine anger when turned against evil. It is Durga's story which is one of the three great stories in Devi Mahatmya. The world was under attack by Mahisha, the most evil demon in the world, who took many different forms, including that of a buffalo. The male gods, fearing total annihilation endowed Durga with their powers. Riding a lion into battle, Durga slew the buffalo by cutting off its head and then she destroyed the spirit of the demon as it emerged from the buffalo's severed neck. It is through this act that order was established in the world. Durga's victory and power are celebrated every fall throughout India in the Durga Puja. Durga is among the most widely represented visual forms of Devi throughout the Indian subcontinent. She is seen in stone, bronze, wood, clay, and paint; her image is reintegrated in the contemporary world in oil on canvas and with powdered pigment in fiberglass.

[DEFINITION: Durga's Powers: Symbolized by her multiple arms each of which carries a different god's weapon: the trident of Shiva, the disk of Vishnu; the conch and noose of the god Varuna; the spear of god Agni; the bow and arrow of the god Vayu; the thunderbolt of the god Indra and the bell worn by his elephant; the scepter of the judge of death and the sword and shield of the god Yama; and the axe of the god Vishvakarman, along with other weapons and armor.]

[IMAGE: At the Hub of Things, 1987. By Anish Kapoor (British, b. 1954 in India). Fiberglass and powdered pigment. Lent by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of the Marion L. Ring Estate, by exchange, 1989. Covered in vivid blue powdered pigment, this fiberglass

concave hemisphere symbolizes Devi in her deep blue form of Kali (literally, dark-skinned one), the great cosmic mother. On a visit to India in 1979, British sculptor Anish Kapoor was intrigued by the mounds of colored powders piled up in stalls outside Hindu temples. Back in Britain, he started exploring the possibilities of using these powdered pigments, first on their own, and then to cover his fiberglass hemispherical depths, ovals, and rounded cavities--all intended to evoke femininity and the Great Goddess. The form of this sculpture suggests the hidden depths of the womb, as well as the burial mound. It thus evokes both life and death and speaks in terms of eternity and timelessness. Just as the fascination of the voice rests in the overwhelming power of the notions of fear, darkness, and the unknown, so too the power and enchantment of the goddess Kali is built on feared darkness, and an apprehension of eternity. Gazing into that deep blue void is a dizzying experience that both alarms and exhilarates. This fear and exhilaration are elements celebrated also in the deep blue goddess Kali.]

Kali may be said to represent the darker side of Devi's power. Her emergence is chronicled in the third story in the Devi Mahatmya. She emerges from Devi's forehead as a burst of furious energy. Kali overpowers and beheads two demon generals, Chanda and Munda, and when she carries their heads to Devi and she is named Chamunda. She is often portrayed as emaciated, black, and with a necklace of skulls. (The story continues in which Devi, Kali and a group of matrikas, or mothers, destroy the demon brothers Shumbha and Nishumbha. In the final battle against Shumbha, Devi absorbs Kali and the matrikas and stands alone for the final battle.)

[IMAGE: Kali Drinks the Blood of Rakabija. Folio from a Devi Mahatmya. India, Punjab Hills, Guler, ca. 1780. Opaque watercolor on paper. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John Gilmore Ford. During a fierce battle in which the Great Goddess demonstrates her omnipotence by defeating powerful demons who terrify even the gods, she encounters the fierce Raktabija. Every drop of blood he sheds turns into another demon as it touches the earth. A unique strategy has to be devised to contain him. A fiery burst of energy emerging from Devi's forehead takes the dark skeletal form of goddess Kali. With her huge mouth and enormous tongue she ferociously laps up Raktabija's blood, thus preventing the uprising of further demons. Raktabija appears twice in the painting. In the upper quadrant we see him righting with numerous dancing demons springing from his blood; to the lower right, his twisted torso lies bloodless and conquered.]

The third story of the Devi Mahatmya shows Devi in her universal shakti (literally energy or power). This is the most abstract way of defining or naming the Great Goddess. Here Devi is central to the creation myth; she is the power that induces the god Vishnu's deep slumber on the waters of the cosmic ocean prior to the creation of the world which is a continuous cycle of creation, destruction and recreation. Vishnu lies on his serpent that is coiled in the form of a couch. Two demons arise from Vishnu's sleeping body and set out to slay Brahma who is preparing to create the next cycle of the universe. Brahma sings to the Great Goddess, asking her to withdraw from Vishnu so he can waken and slay the demons. Devi agrees to withdraw and Vishnu wakes and kills the demons. Here Devi serves as the agent who allows the cosmic order to be restored to the world. This is the first story told in the Devi Mahatmya. However, this tale has rarely inspired artistic creations, perhaps because Devi's role is one of quiet withdrawal rather than dynamic action.

| [PREVIOUS](#) | [NEXT](#) |

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

Mother Goddess Figurine

Pakistan, Mohenjodaro, ca. 2,600 - 1,900 B.C.

Terra-cotta.

Courtesy of Mark Kenoyer

[Return](#)



देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[interpreting devi ▶](#)
[devi through the ages](#)
[● epic](#)
[○ modern](#)

[Full image and description.](#)

Draupadi and Kunti with the Pandavas. Lent by a private collection.

Epic

During the Gupta period (320-647), the goddess, as object of worship, was celebrated in the *Devi Mahatmya*, a fifth-sixth century Sanskrit text. Through the dynamic narration of three stories about her great feats, the *Devi Mahatmya* proclaims Devi's supremacy as the creator of the universe and the one who pervades and sustains creation. Copies of the *Devi Mahatmya* illustrating Devi's adventures in detail became increasingly popular into the 19th century.


[Full image and description.](#)

Sita in the Hermitage of Valmiki. Lent by a private collection.

During most of India's history, a monarchical system of government prevailed. Much evidence exists to suggest that regardless of a monarch's main deity, it was the Great Goddess to whom he turned when he sought victory in battle; it was she who was worshiped prior to embarking on war. This is attested to in the two great Indian epics: the [Mahabharata](#) and the [Ramayana](#).

The sixteenth century led to a resurgent belief that Hindu rulers required the protection of female deities, and from that time onward many Hindu kings chose a particular goddess to appear on coins, seals and other official documents.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[interpreting devi ▶](#)
[devi through the ages](#)
[○ epic](#)
[● modern](#)

[Full image and description.](#)

Sri Kanyaka Paramesvari temple.
Photo by Dick Waghorne.

Modern

As Hinduism has continued to evolve over the centuries, it has willingly accepted the creation of new forms of various deities, including the goddess. In the early years of the twentieth century, the nationalist movement in India picked up the theme of the goddess and transformed her into Mother India. In the 1980s a temple to Mother India was built in the pilgrimage town of Hardwar where the sacred river Ganges finally descends to the plains of India. Today, new formulations or manifestations of Devi tend to be intensely localized and temples to new forms of the goddess continue to be built.

[◀ previous](#)
[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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This elegant terra-cotta image of a goddess or semidivine yakshi, created to be a free-standing image on its own plinth, is an engaging figure with naturally shaped breasts, a pinched waist, and broad hips whose girth is emphasized by a wide hip belt made of three strands of beads. Her elaborate jewelry includes rows of heavy bracelets, anklets, body chains, and earrings with huge curved pendants. Her diaphanous lower garment swings out at her ankles and an outer cloth that reaches to her knees is decorated with rows of ornamented tassels. A fan-shaped headdress and the fabric band that decorates her hair complete her accessories. This terra-cotta sculpture was probably created from a mold but the detailed carving of drapery folds and tassels clearly show that they were added after firing. Clay images such as this, while less expensive to produce than those carved from stone, nevertheless reflect a prosperous urban society.

[Return](#)



Goddess or yakshi
India, state of West Bengal, Chandraketugarh, ca. 100. Gray terra-cotta. Lent by a private collection.

Nagini.

India, state of Bihar, ca. 100. Gray terra-cotta.
Lent by the collection of Anupam and Rajika Puri.

One of the most striking of a group of early terra-cotta images, this sensuous yet disturbing figure has two serpents wrapped around her body. Her long hair, wound with a braided jeweled fabric, is arranged in a magnificent bun at the back, while her girdle consists of a string of large medallions decorated with a floral design and joined by rounded spacer beads. Despite its diminutive size, the image conveys a striking impression of strength and immensity. The two serpents that casually wind themselves around the body of this superb, although partly damaged, terra-cotta figure suggest her affiliation with semidivine serpent beings, the *nagas* and *naginis*. The exact identity of this serpent-related deity is difficult to establish. She seems to be an early prototype of a snake goddess and might be a protective deity invoked for protection against snakes as also against evil and poisons of other kinds.

[Return](#)



Mumba
Devi temple
Mumbai
[Bombay].
Photo by
Neil
Greentree.

[Return](#)



देवी devi

[◀ homepage](#)
[interpreting devi ▶](#)
[worshiping devi](#)
[● festivals](#)

[Full image and description.](#)

Kapalisvara temple. Photo by Dick Waghorne.

Festivals

Festivals in India are timed according to the lunar month with certain days sacred to particular deities. While Devi is worshiped throughout the year, manifestations of the Great Goddess have specific days dedicated to them. There are also many regional variations in festivals. Goddess festivals in rural areas do not follow any fixed calendrical cycles. During festivals it is common for images of the goddess to be dressed and taken out of the temple for public display and processions, thus allowing *darshan* for the throngs of people who take part.


[Full image and description.](#)

Kapalisvara temple. Photo by Dick Waghorne.

While celebrated throughout India, in Calcutta the [Durga Puja](#) is of enormous significance. During this ten day festival, celebrated in late September or early October, images are created of Durga standing astride the buffalo demon. Made of wood, straw, covered with clay, and then painted in bright colors, Durga is paraded through the streets and at the end of the festival the images are submerged into the Ganges, thus returning Devi to her source. Durga is here worshiped as the warrior goddess, the slayer of the demon. But the timing of her festival to coincide with the harvest also associates her with fertility.

Another popular festival, Divali, is associated with the goddess Lakshmi. She is honored with lighted lamps and fireworks during the north Indian Hindu new year in late autumn. Lakshmi is worshiped by businessmen who understand that without the blessings of the goddess of wealth they will not prosper.



[Full image and description.](#)

Puja in hall of South Indian temple. Photo by Neil Greentree.

In the countryside where Lakshmi's primary association is with abundance and fertility, her worship during Divali is seen as important to agricultural success. The lighting of lamps invokes the blessings of the goddess and banishes the demon of misfortune.

[◀ previous](#)

[next ▶](#)

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |
| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |
| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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*Sanctum of the Black
goddess.*

Sri Kanyaka Paramesvari
temple in the heart of old
Georgetown in Chennai.
December, 1994.
Photo by Dick Waghorne.

[Return](#)



*Festival to the goddess
Mariamman.*
Ootacamund, Nilgiri
Hills. April 1995. Photo
by Dick Waghorne.

[Return](#)



Yoginis in a Landscape

India, Mughal period, late 17th century. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by a private collection.

In a deep landscape hazily washed with translucent blues, five *yoginis*, or female ascetics, wearing fine gold-edged muslin and adorned with gold ornaments, hold aloft tiny golden cups of wine while the *yogini* in the center also holds a stringed musical instrument.

Although the artist has depicted the humble possessions of ascetics in precious materials, the *yoginis'* wine cups, stringed instrument, and lightly draped shawls refer to yogic practice. Ascetics usually eschew clothing, smear their bodies with ashes, and chant or sing prayers to the accompaniment of a simple instrument such as the single-string *ektar* shown in this painting. The vast plain depicted in the painting and the delicately limned shrines create an appropriate setting for ascetics who wander between pilgrimage sites or live in isolated retreats, while the coils of lightning in the sky add a touch of severity to the dramatic effect.

[Return](#)



The Persian inscription inset along the painting's lower edge seems to suggest that it was produced for Emperor Jahangir (reigned 1605-27) by the seventeenth-century artist Kesu Khurd. However, the work is not in the style of Kesu Khurd, and the inscription seems to have been added by later artists in admiration of the work of earlier master.

*Milk pot
festival.*
Photo by
Dick
Waghorne.

[Return](#)

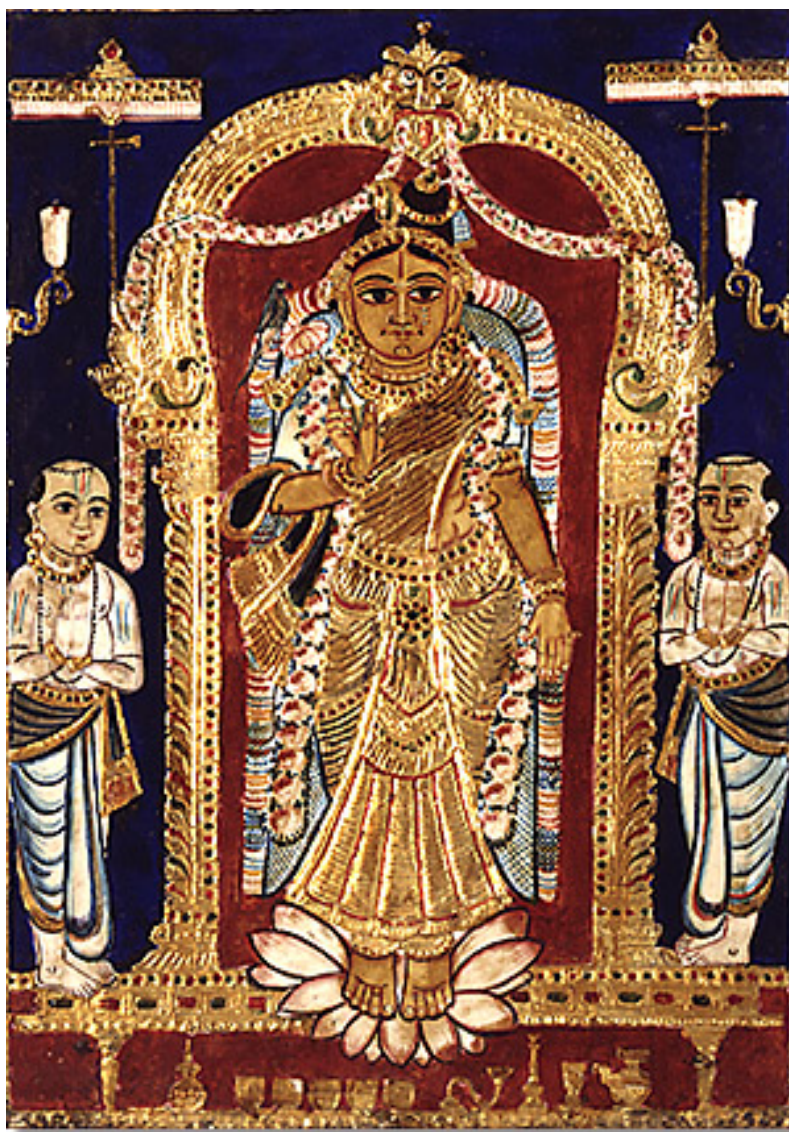


Saint Andal

India, state of Tamil Nadu, Tanjavur, 20th century. Opaque watercolor and gold on textile mounted on board. Lent by a private collection.

Saint Andal, a surprisingly versatile poet and devotee of Vishnu, lived in southern India around the year 800. Andal's poetry is full of the intensity of her longing for union with her chosen lord, Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu. In this image wide-eyed Andal, represented as a garlanded icon standing on a pink lotus, gestures benevolently from a temple niche, and is flanked on both sides by a Vaishnava priest (one devoted to Vishnu) in an attitude of devotion. The gold relief technique, which arose from the application of a paste of sawdust and glue before the design was modeled and gilded, was applied to a cloth surface that was made to adhere to a board pasted upon a wooden support. This image, produced for use in homes, would have hung within a garden shrine or puja room.

[Return](#)



*Sarasvati*

India, state of Karnataka, Mysore. ca. 1830-40. Opaque watercolor on paper. Lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Glowing tones of rich emerald, carmine, and gold animate this simple icon of Sarasvati, the goddess of learning and music. She is draped in an open-ended garland of pink flowers and holds the lute-like vina, a rectangular palm-leaf manuscript, and a writing implement. Devotees, particularly children starting school, and students of all ages, workshop Sarasvati as the source of knowledge. As the goddess of music she is particularly sacred to those who sing or play musical instruments. This painted image was made for a family shrine in the Mysore region of southern India during the early nineteenth century.

[Return](#)

River Goddess Ganga on Her Fish Mount

India, Punjab Hills, Mandi, ca. 1815. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by the San Diego Museum of Art: Edwin Binney 3rd Collection.

The goddess Ganga, garbed in pink-tinged white garments and holding aloft a water pot and lotus flower, sits on a large fish in the midst of a Himalayan pool. Ganga is the personification of the Ganges, India's sacred river. The cool silvery tones of the mountain peaks, flowing waters, and the fair-skinned goddess on her vehicle evoke the pure waters she represents. The goddess descended from the heavens into the Himalayas and from there she flowed into the Indian plains. Ganga is thus a bridge from the heavens to the earth, and devotees who bathe in the river or are cremated by its banks are released from the cycle of mundane existence. This painting, one of a series with similar borders of pink lozenges within rectangular cartouches, was produced in the early nineteenth century for the Hindu ruler of Mandi, a small kingdom in the Punjab Hills.



[Return](#)



Dancing Bhadrakali Adored by the Gods
Folio 45 from the Tantric Devi series. India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1660-70. Opaque watercolor, gold, silver, and beetle-wing cases on paper (border restored). Lent by a private collection on loan to Museum Rietberg, Zurich.

"Dancing Bhadrakali Adored by the Gods"
Praised by Brahma, Madhava, Sharva, Indra
hailed by the three worlds
with laughing face
intoxicated by drinking wine and blood
she dances with delight
Once again she drinks wine--
reveling in the musical sound of her vina
she sings joyously--
once again she drinks wine
I meditate upon Bhadrakali
with the seed mantra bhaim.

[Return](#)

Bhadrakali, Destroyer of the Universe

Folio 47 from the Tantric Devi series. India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1660-70. Opaque watercolor, gold, silver, and beetle-wing cases on paper (border restored). Lent by the Howard Hodgkin Collection, London.

"Bhadrakali, Destroyer of the Universe"

In her lotus like hand she holds
the severed head of the creator of the world
She smiles and sounds satisfied
She devours the mover of the entire universe
Like limp darbha* grass
she holds the bodies of
eternally dark Vishnu and Shiva
I meditate upon Bhadrakali
glowing like new clouds
standing upon a corpse.

*a type of grass native to India used in sacred rites

[Return](#)





Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana in the Forest
India, Punjab Hills, Kangra, ca. 1790. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by the San Diego Museum of Art: Edwin Binney 3rd Collection.

For over two millennia, the famed Ramayana has been told and retold in many regional versions. Painted manuscripts of the epic were repeatedly commissioned by Hindu monarchs. This folio depicts the forest exile of Rama, Sita, and Rama's brother Lakshmana, who left the kingdom clad in the stark bark-and-leaf garments of ascetics. Beneath a tree's richly detailed greenery, Rama and Sita exchange a look of ardent affection as Sita proffers a meal in a leaf bowl to Rama. In spite of his repose, Rama keeps his sword on his lap and a bow by his side, while his quiver of arrows hangs from a nearby branch. To the left, Lakshmana attentively skins a black buck in preparation for a meal of roasted venison kebabs. The naturalistic modeling of graceful figures in soft colors, depicted against the undulating hills of the surrounding countryside, situate these mythic events within the region of the Punjab Hills.

[Return](#)

Lotus-Clad Radha and Krishna

India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1730.

Opaque watercolor on paper. Lent by the Girsjaran and Elvira Sidhu Collection.

Clad entirely in lotus petals and sitting on lotus thrones, Radha and Krishna here gaze intently into each other's eyes. Images of Radha and Krishna in flower adornment (phulsajjya) are somewhat rare, and the absence of inscription to accompany such paintings prevents a precise definition of the significance of the iconographic formula. Lotuses, however, are multivalent symbols with a long history of use in the religious imagery of the Indian subcontinent. Since lotuses rise gleaming and fresh out of muddy ponds, they generally represent fertility and purity. The lotus-petal garments further suggest a common act of devotional worship through the offering of flowers to the gods. Within the specific context of the worship of Radha and Krishna, the lotus may refer to the blissful union of the two in the land of Brindavan, Krishna's childhood home. Pilgrimage maps often depicted Brindavan in the shape of a lotus. Radha's lotus braid is a charming extra detail added by the artist.



[Return](#)

Dancing Bhadrakali Adored by the Gods

Praised by Brahma, Madhava,
Sharva, Indra
hailed by the three worlds
with laughing face
intoxicated by drinking wine and
blood
she dances with delight
Once again she drinks wine--
reveling in the musical sound of her
vina
she sings joyously--
once again she drinks wine
I meditate upon Bhadrakali
with the seed mantra bhaim.

[Return](#)



Dancing Bhadrakali Adored by the Gods.

Folio 45 from the Tantric Devi series. India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1660-70. Opaque watercolor, gold, silver, and beetle-wing cases on paper (border restored). Lent by a private collection on loan to Museum Rietberg, Zurich.

Parvati.

India, state of Tamil Nadu, Chola period, ca 1100.
Bronze. Lent by a private collection.

Parvati's exquisite smiling face welcomes worshipers who would never have seen her as she appears here. In a temple setting, she would have been draped with silks, adorned with gold and gem-studded jewels and multiple garlands of flowers that would have totally concealed the lines of the sculpture. This bronze is a festival icon carried in procession during every temple festival. The double lotus upon which the goddess stands would have been inset into a rectangular pedestal with holes through it or with lugs attached so that inserted poles could rest on the shoulders of temple officers who carried the image.

[Return](#)



Dayini

As dayini, gracious donor of boons, she blesses devotees with wealth, fortune, and success. She is a gentle, radiant figure who attends to the daily needs of those who adore her. Here we see Devi as Lakshmi, Sarasvati, the river goddess Ganga, Vasudhara, the Buddhist goddess Tara; and the Jain goddess Ambika. The first appearance of female divinities was in the guise of dayini, the gentle and beneficent fulfiller of the desires of devotees, a role which remains one of enduring strength and attraction. Dayinis take many and varied guises within the Hindu religion, and they also penetrate the Buddhist and Jain faiths which arose around the fifth century B.C.

[IMAGE: Parvati. India, state of Tamil Nadu, Chola period, ca 1100. Bronze. Lent by a private collection. Created around the year 1100, this majestic bronze of goddess Parvati, consort of god Shiva, stands in an elegant posture with one hand extended and the other raised to hold a flower. She is adorned with multiple strands of necklaces, a simple sacred thread that rests between her breasts, and characteristic armlets and bangles. Her elegantly draped skirt, which clings closely to the contours of her limbs, rests low on her hips and is held in place by a multi-strand girdle. Devotees approach Parvati in this gentle form to ask her to confer general benediction and fortune upon them. Parvati's exquisite smiling face welcomes worshipers who would never have seen her as she appears here. In a temple setting, she would have been draped with silks, adorned with gold and gem-studded jewels and multiple garlands of flowers that would have totally concealed the lines of the sculpture. This bronze is a festival icon carried in procession during every temple festival. The double lotus upon which the goddess stands would have been inset into a rectangular pedestal with holes through it or with lugs attached so that inserted poles could rest on the shoulders of temple officers who carried the image.]

Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is worshiped by householders for the health and welfare of their families; business men and women offer her prayers to ensure the success of their endeavors. She is frequently shown standing in her lotus throne and holding lotus buds, which are symbols of beauty and fertility. Lakshmi, a goddess in her own right, is also the wife of the Vishnu and as Vishnu has nine reincarnations, so does Lakshmi. The two most popular forms of Vishnu and Lakshmi's reincarnations are Rama and Sita (whose story is told in the Ramayana) and Krishna and Radha. Sita and Radha also appear as another aspect of Devi, that of Heroine and Beloved.

Sarasvati, goddess of learning and music, emerged as early as 1300 B.C. as Vach. Vach was considered both speech itself and the goddess of speech. Later, when transformed into the goddess of learning and music, she acquired her name and a swan as her vehicle. Hindus consider her to be the consort of the god Brahma. Buddhist and Jains, whose faith place emphasis on knowledge as the means to liberation, also worship Sarasvati. She is commonly depicted seated on a lotus holding a stringed instrument, the Vina.

[IMAGE: Jain goddess Sarasvati. By Jagadeva (act. 12th century). India, state of Gujarat, 1153. White marble. Lent by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Anna Bing Arnold. This image of Sarasvati, goddess of music and learning, was carved in 1153. The four-armed goddess holds stylized lotuses (symbols of purity) in both upper hands; one lower hand, now broken, would have held a manuscript, the other was probably lowered in the wish-granting gesture. The inscription on its pedestal notes that when the original image, created one hundred years earlier, suffered irreparable damage, an officer named Parashurama commissioned a sculptor named Jagadeva to create this replacement. Since few artists from ancient India are known by name, this image serves as a valuable document. Sarasvati is venerated in several religions in India. This image was created for a temple of the Jains, a faith that originated in the fifth century B.C. The exquisite goddess, approachable by all who seek knowledge and

musical skill, is testimony to the skill of the otherwise unknown sculptor Jadadeva, who, in the words of the inscription, "aspired for fame."]

[IMAGE: Sarasvati. India, state of Karnataka, Mysore. ca. 1830-40. Opaque watercolor on paper. Lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum. Glowing tones of rich emerald, carmine, and gold animate this simple icon of Sarasvati, the goddess of learning and music. She is draped in an open-ended garland of pink flowers and holds the lute-like vina, a rectangular palm-leaf manuscript, and a writing implement. Devotees, particularly children starting school, and students of all ages, workshop Sarasvati as the source of knowledge. As the goddess of music she is particularly sacred to those who sing or play musical instruments. This painted image was made for a family shrine in the Mysore region of southern India during the early nineteenth century.]

Parvati is the consort of the god Shiva. She is constantly beside Shiva, watching him as he dances the dance of bliss, admiring him in his deeds of annihilation, joining him in games of dice or playing with their two sons, the elephant headed Ganesha and the warrior Skanda. Shiva and Parvati, whose love is deep and abiding, represent the paradigmatic divine family. Shiva and Parvati are often united in a single form known as Ardhanari (literally half woman) to represent the concept that the divine is both male and female.

[IMAGE: Parvati, India, state of Tamil Nadu, Chola period, ca. 1100. Bronze. Lent by a private collection. Created around the year 1100, this majestic bronze of goddess Parvati, consort of god Shiva, stands in an elegant posture with one hand extended and the other raised to hold a flower. She is adorned with multiple strands of necklaces, a simple sacred thread that rests between her breasts, and characteristic armlets and bangles. Her elegantly draped skirt, which clings closely to the contours of her limbs, rests low on her hips and is held in place by a multi-strand girdle. Devotees approach Parvati in this gentle form to ask her to confer general benediction and fortune upon them. Parvati's exquisite smiling face welcomes worshipers who would never have seen her as she appears here. In a temple setting she would be draped with silks, adorned with gold and gem-studded jewels and multiple garlands of flowers that would totally conceal the lines of the sculpture. This bronze is a festival icon carried in procession during every temple festival. The double lotus upon which the goddess stands would have been inset into a rectangular pedestal with holes through it or with lugs attached so that inserted poles could rest on the shoulders of temple officers who carried the image.]

[IMAGE: Parvati and Ganesha. India, Jaipur, ca. 1820. Opaque watercolor on paper. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John Gilmore Ford. This charming painting shows goddess Parvati suckling baby Ganesha as the infant places his hand upon her other breast. Elephant-headed Ganesha, an important and beloved deity worshiped at the start of any enterprise, is usually depicted as an adult. Here, the artist portrays Ganesha as an infant to emphasize Parvati's maternal love. Images of a nursing mother and child are rare in India and it is likely that the iconography was borrowed from European depictions of the Virgin Mary and the infant Christ that entered India beginning in the sixteenth century. This image was probably painted in the early nineteenth-century in Jaipur, a Hindu kingdom located in eastern Rajasthan, not far from Delhi.]

The concept of water as potent energy in liquid form dates back to 1300 B.C. By the start of the current era, the rivers Ganges and Yamuna were personified and invoked as life-giving waters. The celestial Ganges came to earth (starting in the Himalayas and flowing into the plains below) so that the cremated ashes of ancestors could be immersed in her waters thus enabling them to attain salvation.

[IMAGE: River Goddess Ganga on Her Fish Mount. India, Punjab Hills, Mandi, ca. 1815. Opaque

watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by the San Diego Museum of Art: Edwin Binney 3rd Collection. The goddess Ganga, garbed in pink-tinged white garments and holding aloft a water pot and lotus flower, sits on a large fish in the midst of a Himalayan pool. Ganga is the personification of the Ganges, India's sacred river. The cool silvery tones of the mountain peaks, flowing waters, and the fair-skinned goddess on her vehicle evoke the pure waters she represents. The goddess descended from the heavens into the Himalayas and from there she flowed into the Indian plains. Ganga is thus a bridge from the heavens to the earth, and devotees who bathe in the river or are cremated by its banks are released from the cycle of mundane existence. This painting, one of a series with similar borders of pink lozenges within rectangular cartouches, was produced in the early nineteenth century for the Hindu ruler of Mandi, a small kingdom in the Punjab Hills.]

Like her Hindu counterpart, Lakshmi, Vashudhara is the Buddhist goddess of wealth, good fortune and abundance and is one of the most popular household deities of Nepal. Devotees appeal to her for earthly riches and for fertility of the field and womb.

[IMAGE: Vasudhara, Goddess of Abundance, Nepal, 1082. Gilt copper inlaid with precious and semiprecious stones, traces of vermillion. Lent by Susanne K. Bennet, courtesy Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution LTS1996.5.3 Like her Hindu counterpart Lakshmi, Vasudhara is the Buddhist goddess of wealth, good fortune, and abundance. She is one of the most popular household deities of Nepal, implored for earthly riches as well as for fertility of field and womb. In this image, the six-armed goddess is seated at ease, holding four precious, life-sustaining symbols: a book of knowledge, a sheaf of grain, an auspicious water-filled vessel, and a cluster of jewels. She is richly attired and wears a towering ceremonial crown. A rare feature of the image is the fact that the exact date, 1082, is mentioned in the four-line inscription on the back of the lotus pedestal recording its donation, presumably to a monastic chapel.]

One of the most popular goddess among Buddhists is Tara who is adored for protection from evil and to overcome obstacles. Goddesses were first introduced into the Jain faith as attendant deities of the twenty-four liberators known as Jinas. Of these Ambika (Mother Dear), is associated with the mango tree and its fruit and is always portrayed with one or both of her sons. She is worshiped on behalf of mothers and infants.

[IMAGE: Tara the Savioress. Nepal, 14th century. Gilt copper alloy, semiprecious stones, gold, and pigment. Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Louis V. Bell Fund, 1966. Tara, savioress and goddess of compassion, is a deity of immense significance among Buddhists. Her name is derived from the verb tara, meaning "to cross," for she enables the devotee to cross the ocean of existence. Supplicants chiefly approach Tara for protection, but also make requests for material benefits. In this splendid example of Nepalese metalwork, with its characteristic inlay of semiprecious stones, Tara is depicted as a slender maiden of benign expression. She is regally ornamented with a flamboyant, jewel-encrusted crown secured by elaborate, fluttering ribbons, and her lotus is seen at her left shoulder. Her hands are imprinted with auspicious symbols; one makes the gesture of teaching, while the other is lowered in the wish-granting gesture. Although clearly made by Nepalese hands, this image was either commissioned by a Tibetan or made for the Tibetan market, for the gold and color applied to Tara's face reflect Tibetan practice.]

[IMAGE: Ambika. India, state of Bihar or West Bengal, Pala period, 9th century. Bronze. Lent by Dr. Siddharth Bhansali. This exquisite little bronze image dating to the ninth century, shows Amika seated on a double-lotus set upon a tall pedestal. One infant stands playfully in her lap while the second sits cross-legged on the opposite side beside her lotus throne. With one hand she supports a child and with the

other holds a bunch of mangoes. The articulation of the limbs and the detailed treatment of the jewelry and drapery pattern reflect the work of a master artist. Most likely the bronze was commissioned for a home shrine, perhaps that of the devotee included along the lower left support of the pedestal.]

| [PREVIOUS](#) | [NEXT](#) |

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Devi Slaying the Buffalo

Ambika Mata Temple at Jagat, Rajasthan, 10th century. Photo by Neil Greentree.

[Return](#)



Covered in vivid blue powdered pigment, this fiberglass concave hemisphere symbolizes Devi in her deep blue form of Kali (literally, dark-skinned one), the great cosmic mother. On a visit to India in 1979, British sculptor Anish Kapoor was intrigued by the mounds of colored powders piled up in stalls outside Hindu temples. Back in Britain, he started exploring the possibilities of using these powdered pigments, first on their own, and then to cover his fiberglass hemispherical depths -- ovals, and rounded cavities -- all intended to evoke femininity and the Great Goddess.

[Return](#)



The form of this sculpture suggests the hidden depths of the womb, as well as the burial mound. It thus evokes both life and death and speaks in terms of eternity and timelessness. Just as the fascination of the voice rests in the overwhelming power of the notions of fear, darkness, and the unknown, so too the power and enchantment of the goddess Kali is built on feared darkness, and an apprehension of eternity. Gazing into that deep blue void is a dizzying experience that both alarms and exhilarates. This fear and exhilaration are elements celebrated also in the deep blue goddess Kali.

Chamunda

Nepal, 14th century. Copper, gemstones, traces of pigment, and gilt. Lent by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, General Acquisitions Fund.

This tiny Nepalese Devi, in her terrifying cosmic form as Chamunda, is one of the most arresting, macabre, and imaginative of images; it is both iconographically complex and technically demanding. With a trio of human skulls as her seat and a cadaver as her footrest, the emaciated form of Chamunda is richly adorned with conventional ornaments as well as a stupendous garland of severed heads suspended by their hair.

A bear's skin is tied over Chamunda's clinging skirt, with its head and legs dangling beside her buttocks. She wears the skin of an elephant as a cape and grasps two of the animal's feet in her uppermost hands. In her other hands she brandishes an array of weapons and awe-inspiring objects. Devi manifested herself as this menacing form to combat the powerful demon generals Chanda and Munda, whom she slayed after a fierce battle

[Return](#)



Kali Drinks the Blood of Raktabija.
Folio from a Devi Mahatmya. India,
Punjab Hills, Guler, ca. 1780.
Opaque watercolor on paper. Lent
by Mr. and Mrs. John Gilmore
Ford.

Raktabija appears twice in the painting. In the upper quadrant we see him fighting with numerous dancing demons who spring from his blood; to the lower right, his twisted torso lies bloodless and conquered.

[Return](#)



*Vishnu Reclining on his
Serpent who floats on
the cosmic waters.*
7th Century, Balaju,
Nepal. ACSAA Color
Slide Project, University
of Michigan. Photo by
Barbara Wagner.

[Return](#)



Lakshmi Poster

Contemporary chromolithograph of Lakshmi.
Photo by Neil Greentree.

[Return](#)



Jain goddess Sarasvati.

By Jagadeva (act. 12th century). India, state of Gujarat, 1153. White marble. Lent by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Anna Bing Arnold.

This image of Sarasvati, goddess of music and learning, was carved in 1153. The four-armed goddess holds stylized lotuses (symbols of purity) in both upper hands; one lower hand, now broken, would have held a manuscript, the other was probably lowered in the wish-granting gesture. The inscription on its pedestal notes that when the original image, created one hundred years earlier, suffered irreparable damage, an officer named Parashurama commissioned a sculptor named Jagadeva to create this replacement. Since few artists from ancient India are known by name, this image serves as a valuable document.

Sarasvati is venerated in several religions in India. This image was created for a temple of the Jains, a faith that originated in the fifth century B.C. The exquisite goddess, approachable by all who seek knowledge and musical skill, is testimony to the skill of the otherwise unknown sculptor Jagadeva, who, in the words of the inscription, "aspired for fame."

[Return](#)



Sarasvati.

India, state of Karnataka, Mysore.
ca. 1830-40. Opaque watercolor on
paper. Lent by the Victoria and
Albert Museum.

Glowing tones of rich emerald, carmine, and gold animate this simple icon of Sarasvati, the goddess of learning and music. She is draped in an open-ended garland of pink flowers and holds the lute-like vina, a rectangular palm-leaf manuscript, and a writing implement. Devotees, particularly children starting school, and students of all ages, worship Sarasvati as the source of knowledge. As the goddess of music she is particularly sacred to those who sing or play musical instruments. This painted image was made for a family shrine in the Mysore region of southern India during the early nineteenth century.

[Return](#)



Parvati and Ganesha.

India, Jaipur, ca. 1820. Opaque watercolor on paper. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John Gilmore Ford.

This charming painting shows goddess Parvati suckling baby Ganesha as the infant places his hand upon her other breast. Elephant-headed Ganesha, an important and beloved deity worshiped at the start of any enterprise, is usually depicted as an adult. Here, the artist portrays Ganesha as an infant to emphasize Parvati's maternal love. Images of a nursing mother and child are rare in India and it is likely that the iconography was borrowed from European depictions of the Virgin Mary and the infant Christ that entered India beginning in the sixteenth century. This image was probably painted in the early nineteenth-century in Jaipur, a Hindu kingdom located in eastern Rajasthan, not far from Delhi.

[Return](#)



Parvati.

India, state of Tamil Nadu, Chola period, ca 1100.
Bronze. Lent by a private collection.

Parvati's exquisite smiling face welcomes worshipers who would never have seen her as she appears here. In a temple setting, she would have been draped with silks, adorned with gold and gem-studded jewels and multiple garlands of flowers that would have totally concealed the lines of the sculpture. This bronze is a festival icon carried in procession during every temple festival. The double lotus upon which the goddess stands would have been inset into a rectangular pedestal with holes through it or with lugs attached so that inserted poles could rest on the shoulders of temple officers who carried the image.

[Return](#)



River Goddess Ganga on Her Fish Mount.
India, Punjab Hills, Mandi, ca. 1815.
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper.
Lent by the San Diego Museum of Art:
Edwin Binney 3rd Collection.

The goddess Ganga, garbed in pink-tinged white garments and holding aloft a water pot and lotus flower, sits on a large fish in the midst of a Himalayan pool. Ganga is the personification of the Ganges, India's sacred river. The cool silvery tones of the mountain peaks, flowing waters, and the fair-skinned goddess on her vehicle evoke the pure waters she represents. The goddess descended from the heavens into the Himalayas and from there she flowed into the Indian plains. Ganga is thus a bridge from the heavens to the earth, and devotees who bathe in the river or are cremated by its banks are released from the cycle of mundane existence. This painting, one of a series with similar borders of pink lozenges within rectangular cartouches, was produced in the early nineteenth century for the Hindu ruler of Mandi, a small kingdom in the Punjab Hills.

[Return](#)



Vasudhara, Goddess of Abundance
Nepal, 1082. Gilt copper inlaid with
precious and semiprecious stones, traces of
vermillion. Lent by Susanne K. Bennet,
courtesy Arthur M. Sackler Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution LTS1996.5.3

Like her Hindu counterpart Lakshmi, Vasudhara is the Buddhist goddess of wealth, good fortune, and abundance. She is one of the most popular household deities of Nepal, implored for earthly riches as well as for fertility of field and womb. In this image, the six-armed goddess is seated at ease, holding four precious, life-sustaining symbols: a book of knowledge, a sheaf of grain, an auspicious water-filled vessel, and a cluster of jewels. She is richly attired and wears a towering ceremonial crown. A rare feature of the image is the fact that the exact date, 1082, is mentioned in the four-line inscription on the back of the lotus pedestal recording its donation, presumably to a monastic chapel.

[Return](#)



Tara the Savioress

Nepal, 14th century. Gilt copper alloy, semiprecious stones, gold, and pigment. Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Louis V. Bell Fund, 1966.

Tara, savior and goddess of compassion, is a deity of immense significance among Buddhists. Her name is derived from the verb *tara*, meaning "to cross," for she enables the devotee to cross the ocean of existence. Supplicants chiefly approach Tara for protection, but also make requests for material benefits. In this splendid example of Nepalese metalwork, with its characteristic inlay of semiprecious stones, Tara is depicted as a slender maiden of benign expression. She is regally ornamented with a flamboyant, jewel-encrusted crown secured by elaborate, fluttering ribbons, and her lotus is seen at her left shoulder. Her hands are imprinted with auspicious symbols; one makes the gesture of teaching, while the other is lowered in the wish-granting gesture. Although clearly made by Nepalese hands, this image was either commissioned by a Tibetan or made for the Tibetan market, for the gold and color applied to Tara's face reflect Tibetan practice.

[Return](#)



Ambika.

India, state of Bihar or West Bengal, Pala period, 9th century. Bronze. Lent by Dr. Siddharth Bhansali

This exquisite little bronze image dating to the ninth century, shows Ambika seated on a double-lotus set upon a tall pedestal. One infant stands playfully in her lap while the second sits cross-legged on the opposite side beside her lotus throne. With one hand she supports a child and with the other holds a bunch of mangoes. The articulation of the limbs and the detailed treatment of the jewelry and drapery pattern reflect the work of a master artist. Most likely the bronze was commissioned for a home shrine, perhaps that of the devotee included along the lower left support of the pedestal.

[Return](#)



During their exile in the forest, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana arrive at the hermitage of the sage Atri, represented by a simple hut amidst trees draped with flowering vines. Seated beneath a tree, from which hangs a shawl, the meditating sage is seen holding his prayer beads. The tranquility of the setting is further enhanced by the tame deer and the sacred tulsi (basil) plant.



The Sage's Wife Clothes Sita

India, Punjab Hills, Kangra, ca. 1780. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by the San Diego Museum of Art: Edwin Binney 3rd Collection.

Within the hut, Sita meets with the sage's wife, Anasuya, herself an illustrious ascetic. Anasuya approves of Sita's accompanying Rama into the forest and blesses her with the gifts of heavenly raiment that will never wear out, fine jewelry, a garland, and an unguent that would guard against the rigors of the forest climate. We see Sita twice. In the first appearance she receives the gift of clothes from Anasuya and exchanges her leaf-and-bark dress for a red skirt and blue shawl; in her second appearance she displays the gift to Rama.

[Return](#)

For over two millennia, the famed *Ramayana* has been told and retold in many regional versions. Painted manuscripts of the epic were repeatedly commissioned by Hindu monarchs. This folio depicts the forest exile of Rama, Sita, and Rama's brother Lakshmana, who left the kingdom clad in the stark bark-and-leaf garments of ascetics. Beneath a tree's richly detailed greenery, Rama and Sita exchange a look of ardent affection as Sita proffers a meal in a leaf bowl to Rama. In spite of his repose, Rama keeps his sword on his lap and a bow by his side, while his quiver of arrows hangs from a nearby branch. To the left, Lakshmana attentively skins a black buck in preparation for a meal of roasted venison kebabs. The naturalistic modeling of graceful figures in soft colors, depicted against the undulating hills of the surrounding countryside, situate these mythic events within the region of the Punjab Hills.

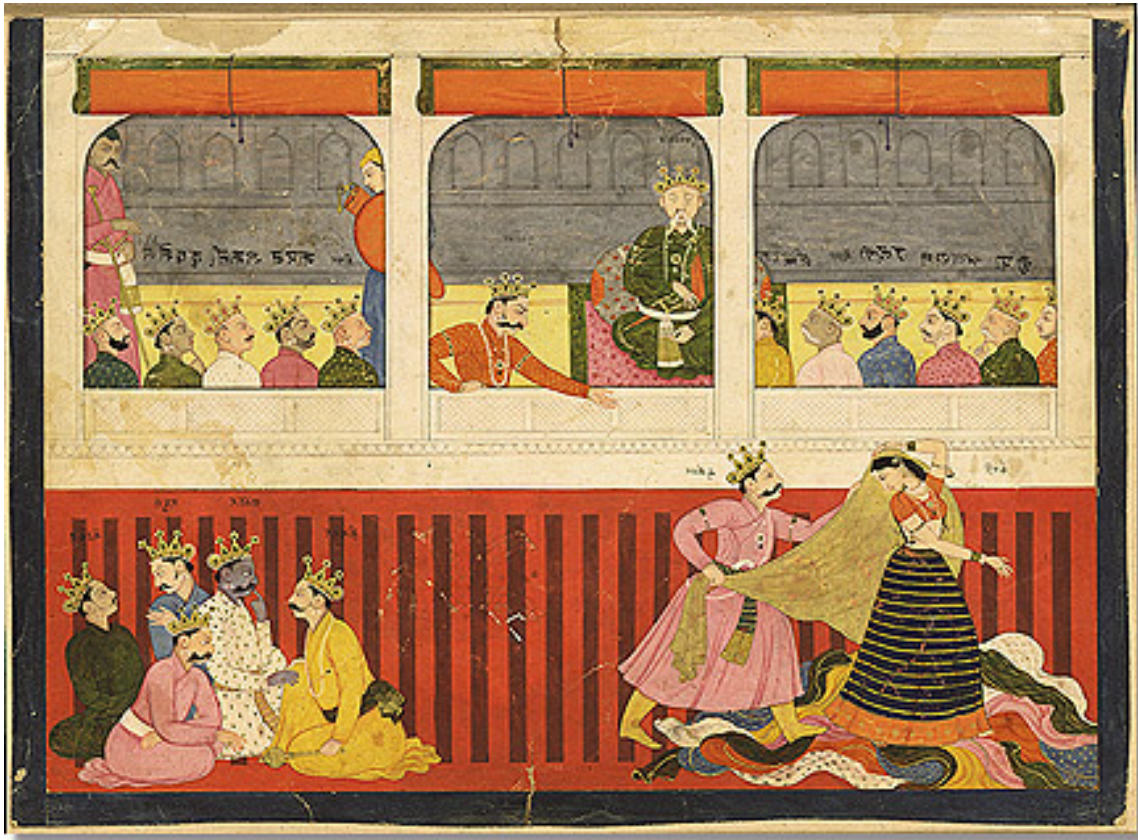
[Return](#)



Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana in the Forest.

India, Punjab Hills, Kangra, ca. 1790. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by the San Diego Museum of Art: Edwin Binney 3rd Collection.

In this evocation of a momentous scene from the Mahabharata epic, the imperious expression and outstretched arm of the Kaurava prince Duryodhana direct attention to the miracle unfolding below. Duryodhana's brother Dushasana forcibly attempts to disrobe Draupadi in the center of the assembly hall. Draupadi's husbands, the Pandavas, who have lost her as well as their kingdom in a crooked game of dice, sit helplessly to the right.



The Disrobing of Draupadi

Attributed to Nainsukh (1710-1778). India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1765. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by the Howard Hodgkin Collection, London.

As Dushasana repeatedly tries to strip Draupadi, Krishna's divine grace provides her with an unending length of material as a sari, thus sparing her further humiliation. The episode of the dice game and the disrobing of Draupadi is the most important drama enacted in an eighteen-night festival held in many towns and cities. This inauspicious event, which tarnishes Draupadi's honor, marks her metamorphosis from contented wife into vengeful goddess.

[Return](#)

This story from the final part of the epic *Mahabharata* features Ashvatthaman, a Kaurava soldier who massacred Draupadi's sleeping sons in a loathsome and infamous manner. The Pandavas spare Ashvatthaman's life but punish him by removing the miraculous protective jewel crest that has been embedded in his forehead since birth. They also curse him to spend thousands of years in pain, shunned by humans and enveloped by the stench of decaying flesh.



Draupadi and Ashvatthaman

India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, 1720-30. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by a private collection.

The painting shows Draupadi sitting with her husbands, the five Pandavas, within an orange chamber, her upraised hand indicating that she is speaking. Initially Draupadi demanded the death of the murderer but finally agreed to the lesser punishment out of respect of Ashvatthaman's father. Outside the pavilion, we see Ashvatthaman skulking away with his turban bedraggled and head bleeding from the removal of his jeweled crest.

[Return](#)

Clad entirely in lotus petals and sitting on lotus thrones, Radha and Krishna here gaze intently into each other's eyes. Images of Radha and Krishna in flower adornment (*phulsajjya*) are somewhat rare, and the absence of inscription to accompany such paintings prevents a precise definition of the significance of the iconographic formula. Lotuses, however, are multivalent symbols with a long history of use in the religious imagery of the Indian subcontinent. Since lotuses rise gleaming and fresh out of muddy ponds, they generally represent fertility and purity. The lotus-petal garments further suggest a common act of devotional worship through the offering of flowers to the gods. Within the specific context of the worship of Radha and Krishna, the lotus may refer to the blissful union of the two in the land of Brindavan, Krishna's childhood home. Pilgrimage maps often depicted Brindavan in the shape of a lotus. Radha's lotus braid is a charming extra detail added by the artist.

[Return](#)



Lotus-Clad Radha and Krishna

India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1730. Opaque watercolor on paper.
Lent by the Gursharan and Elvira Sidhu Collection.

Radha and Krishna Entwined

India, state of West Bengal, 20th century. Bronze. Lent by Leo S. Figiel, M.D.

This folk style image of Radha and Krishna indicates the extent to which their legend with its easy charm and immediate appeal, has spread through various levels of society in India. The image of Radha entwining herself around Krishna is a charming piece that captures the charismatic quality of their love. While Krishna plays upon his flute (now missing), Radha creeps up behind him and presses herself against him. She envelops him in embrace, wrapping one leg around him and drawing him close with both arms. This exquisitely modeled twosome is an arresting presentation of Radha's utterly rapturous love for Krishna.

[Return](#)



Durga with Her Family.

India, state of West Bengal or Orissa,
17th-18th century. Bronze. Lent by Leo S.
Figiel. M. D.

In eastern India, Durga, the slayer of the buffalo demon, is also visualized as Uma, the consort of Shiva. When the goddess visits her parents' home during Durga Puja, a ten-day fall festival especially popular in this region, she is accompanied by her children. In this bronze altar, the central figure of Durga slaying the buffalo demon is flanked by the goddesses Lakshmi and Sarasvati, envisioned in this region as Durga's daughters. Alongside are her sons, Kartikeya standing on his peacock and Ganesha seated on his rat. The griffin head given to Durga's lion is a regional characteristic.

In this large and complex tableau, each figure is cast individually by the lost-wax process. It juxtaposes Durga's two contradictory roles--the divine destroyer of the demon and the affectionate daughter and mother.

[Return](#)



Woman with parasol and pot.
India, state of West Bengal or Orissa, 17th-18th
century. Bronze. Lent by Leo S. Figiel. M. D.

[Return](#)



Elongated goddess.

India, state of Madhya Pradesh, Bastar district,
19th or 20th century. Bronze. Lent by Leo S.
Figiel, M. D.

The piquant proportions of this female figure, with its bold deliberate distortions of form, illustrate the sharp contrast that exists between depictions of deities within classical Hinduism and folk religion. Sculptors who make images for the traditional temples work according to textual prescriptions following strict guidelines for the physical proportions of deities, their adornment, and other iconographic details. Folk artisans are unfettered by any such regulations. Their work, believed to be inspired directly by the deities who appear in their dream visions, renders each piece unique. This figure may have been either an icon or equally a votive object that was offered to a goddess. Only the pedestal retains traces of the faint horizontal ribbing that is evidence of the wax-thread process typical of Bastar bronzes.

[Return](#)



Female bhuta.

India, state of Karnataka, coastal south Kanara, ca. 1800. Wood with traces of pigment. Lent by Dr. Siddharth Bhansali.

This small, stocky image of a bhuta, or supernatural spirit, may represent the goddess Chikku (literally, small one), a petite, demure figure who is reportedly today's favorite bhuta. She is abundantly ornamented with her hair drawn to one side as a ponytail, and her strikingly stylized facial features give her an air of austere grandeur. A bowl of sacred ash, known as vibhuti, often rests in her upraised hand.

[Return](#)



Female bhuta.

India, state of Karnataka, coastal south
Kanara, ca. 1800. Metal. Lent by Dr.
Siddharth Bhansali.

This metal image with hands joined in a gesture of adoration is usually placed in home shrines situated in a room at the rear of the house. Only on festival days would such an image be taken out of its seclusion and brought into the square where the Koolam dance is performed. This bhuta has a wide, infectious smile, elaborate jewelry, a topknot pulled to one side of the head, and a skirt whose swirling movement are ingeniously depicted.

[Return](#)



Nagini.

India, state of Bihar, ca. 100. Gray terra-cotta.
Lent by the collection of Anupam and Rajika Puri.

One of the most striking of a group of early terra-cotta images, this sensuous yet disturbing figure has two serpents wrapped around her body. Her long hair, wound with a braided jeweled fabric, is arranged in a magnificent bun at the back, while her girdle consists of a string of large medallions decorated with a floral design and joined by rounded spacer beads. Despite its diminutive size, the image conveys a striking impression of strength and immensity. The two serpents that casually wind themselves around the body of this superb, although partly damaged, terra-cotta figure suggest her affiliation with semidivine serpent beings, the *nagas* and *naginis*. The exact identity of this serpent-related deity is difficult to establish. She seems to be an early prototype of a snake goddess and might be a protective deity invoked for protection against snakes as also against evil and poisons of other kinds.

[Return](#)



Sundari beneath a Mango Tree.

India, state of Madhya Pradesh or southern Uttar Pradesh, mid-9th century. Sandstone. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John Gilmore Ford.

Poised beneath a mango tree this exquisite *sundari* (beauty) ignores the monkey perched on the branch above and reaches up with her right arm to bring down a cluster of ripe fruit into her raised, now-damaged, left hand. According to ancient lore, the sound of a woman's laughter was all that was needed to induce the mango tree to blossom and bear fruit. This figure speaks of the importance of the theme of woman in ancient India where her presence was believed to confer auspiciousness on any monument. The image emphasized the importance of the feminine, given its associations with the bearing and rearing of children. The female figure was an obvious emblem of fertility and thereby of growth, abundance, and prosperity, hence it was a short step to visualize her as a symbol of all that is auspicious. Carved as a decorative bracket to connect a pillar with the ceiling, this *sundari* graced the interior of a temple with her auspicious presence. As devotees glanced upward, their gaze would have met at least four such *sundaris*, creating a joyous atmosphere within the sacred precincts.

[Return](#)



Karaikkal Ammaiyyar, a woman from the merchant, or *vaishya*, community, lived in the town of Karaikkal sometime in the sixth century. She is one of the sixty-three saints of Shiva from Tamil Nadu. When young and beautiful Punitavati beseeched Shiva to divest her of the burden of her flesh and asked only that she watch him dance into eternity, a miracle occurred. In place of the young woman there stood an emaciated hag, known henceforth as Mother of Karaikkal, or Karaikkal Ammaiyyar.

Karraikal Ammaiyyar wrote poetry in praise of Shiva. Perhaps her description of herself as the "ghoul of Karaikkal" in the final signature verse of some of her poems was partly responsible for the often fearsome imagery resorted to by the artists. This image portrays her not as a fearsome figure but as a once-beautiful woman who has lost her flesh. Her calm, smiling face expresses her inner peace while she blissfully plays her cymbals and sings to the glory of Shiva.

[Return](#)



Seated Saint Karaikkal Ammaiyyar

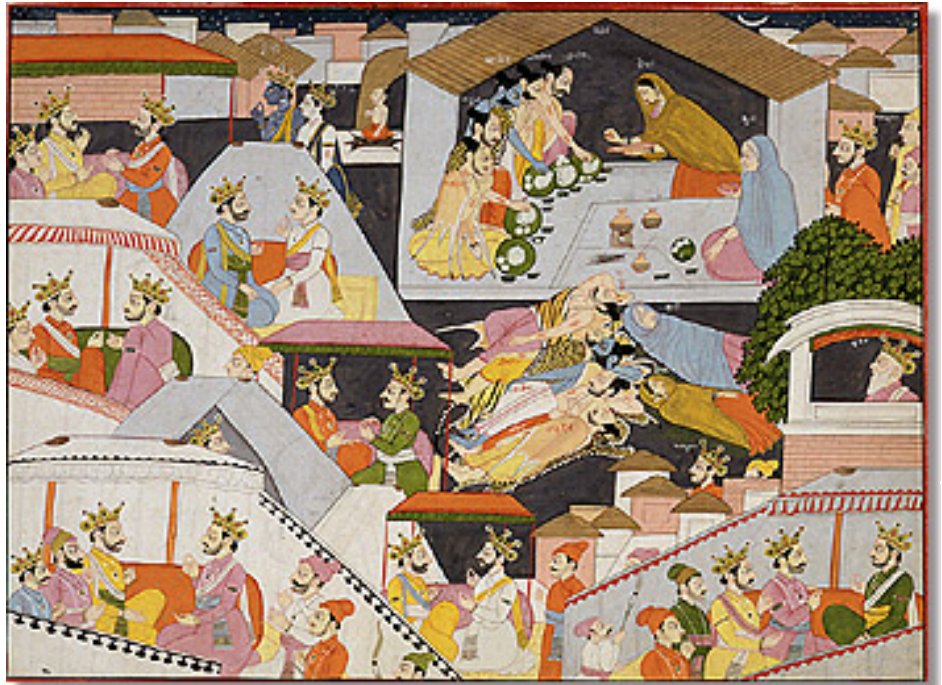
India, state of Tamil Nadu, Chola period, 12th century.
Bronze. Lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase,
Edward J. Gallagher, Jr. Bequest in memory of his father,
Edward Joseph Gallagher, his mother, Ann Hay Gallagher,
and his son, Edward Joseph Gallagher III, 1982

Draupadi and Kunti with the Pandavas

India, Punjab Hills, Kangra, ca. 1800. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by a private collection.

This painting from a manuscript of the Mahabharata epic illustrates an early episode in which the five Pandava brothers, disguised as Brahmin ascetics, have won an archery contest by which they secure the lovely Draupadi as bride and bring her to their mother. Several episodes are depicted on this page in a series of vignettes in which the characters appear repeatedly to indicate the passage of time. Draupadi's independence and fearless spirit, evident throughout the period, is a product of her upbringing as a warrior's daughter.

[Return](#)



We see Draupadi, the Pandavas, and their mother, Kunti, eating a meal; then their figures are repeated as they lie down to sleep. Draupadi's brother eavesdrops on their nighttime conversation to ascertain the identity of the ascetics. He then hastens back to report to his father to stop worrying about Draupadi, because the ascetics are indeed princes in disguise. It is quite naturally important that the daughter of a monarch be married to one of royal blood.

Sita in the Hermitage of Valmiki
India, Punjab Hills, Kangra, ca.
1800-25. Opaque watercolor,
gold, and ink on paper. Lent by a
private collection.

Rescued from the demon
Ravana's fortress at Lanka, and
having proven her fidelity to
Rama by emerging unscathed
from a test by fire, Sita returns to
Ayodhya with her husband,
Rama. Back in their northern
capital innuendos are cast upon
Sita's fidelity and the morality of
Rama's acceptance of her. Rama
forthwith instructs his brother
Lakshmana to take the pregnant
Sita into the forest. At the
hermitage of the revered sage
Valmiki, Sita gives birth to her
twin sons, Lava and Kusha. These
events, depicted in this painting,
refer to the last episode of the
Ramayana.

[Return](#)



In the extreme lower left of the painting, Sita enters the hilly landscape following an entourage led by the sage Valmiki. As Sita arrives at the hermitage, her slightly protruding belly reminds us of the condition in which she left Ayodhya. Her subsequent life at the hermitage is presented in several scenes that are distributed throughout the composition and are separated by the rounded contours of reed huts. Sita is seen on three more occasions. At the upper right corner she touches the feet of Valmiki's wife and asks for sanctuary; immediately below she sits in a hut as an acolyte brings her food; and finally, well after the birth of her twins, she is seen playing with one child as the other jumps into the arms of the silver-haired Valmiki.

Sri Kanyaka Paramesvari temple.

[Recently restored] in the heart of old Georgetown in Chennai. December, 1994. Photo by Dick Waghorne.

[Return](#)



Kapalisvara temple.
Mylapore, Chennai.
March 1995.
Photo by Dick
Waghorne.

[Return](#)



Kapalisvara temple.
Mylapore, Chennai. March 1995.
Photo by Dick Waghorne.

[Return](#)



*Puja in hall of
South Indian
temple.*
Photo by Neil
Greentree.

[Return](#)



Heroine and Beloved

As heroine and beloved, Devi comes down to earth and her exemplary life provides an inspiring model for women. Devotees admire and adore these manifestations of Devi because of the greatness of personal sacrifice and commitment to moral obligation; the portrayal of courage, and outspokenness; or the disregard of social norms in the face of overwhelming love.

[IMAGE: Radha and Krishna Dressed in Each Other's Clothes (Lilahava). India, Punjab Hills, Kangra, 18th century. Opaque watercolor on paper. Lent by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Don and Corky Whitaker. Standing with a symmetrical landscape of yellow flowering creepers emerging from the greenery of trees, Radha, holding Krishna's flute, has donned her divine lover's peacock-feather crown and saffron-colored dhoti. Blue-complexioned Krishna, in turn, wears Radha's earrings, red skirt, blouse, and transparent shawl. Holding hands, the two gaze into one another's eyes. This unique visual motif of the clothing exchange serves as a metaphor for Radha and Krishna's shared essence. Radha's and Krishna's donning of each other's garments signifies that the two are identical, as is suggested in this verse by an unknown poet.

She wears his peacock feather,
he dons her lovely, delicate crown;
She sports his yellow garment,
he wraps himself in her beautiful sari
How charming the very sight of it. . .
The daughter of Vrsabhanu [Radha] turns [into] Nanda's son [Krishna],
and Nanda's son, Vrsabhanu's girl.
(Srivasta Goswami, trans. The Divine Consort, 87)]

Sita, heroine of the Ramayana epic, faithfully follows her husband Prince Rama (as incarnation of the god Vishnu) into exile. She has been lauded through the ages as the ideal wife. Abducted by the demon king Ravana and imprisoned for months in his palace before she is finally freed by Rama, she must prove her purity by entering blazing flames from which Agni, god of fire, delivers her intact to Rama. Sita is upheld as the model of wifely love and adherence to duty.

[IMAGE: Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana in the Forest. India, Punjab Hills, Kangra, ca. 1790. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by the San Diego Museum of Art: Edwin Binney 3rd Collection. For over two millennia, the famed Ramayana has been told and retold in many regional versions. Painted manuscripts of the epic were repeatedly commissioned by Hindu monarchs. This folio depicts the forest exile of Rama, Sita, and Rama's brother Lakshmana, who left the kingdom clad in the stark bark-and-leaf garments of ascetics. Beneath a tree's richly detailed greenery, Rama and Sita exchange a look of ardent affection as Sita proffers a meal in a leaf bowl to Rama. In spite of his repose, Rama keeps his sword on his lap and a bow by his side, while his quiver of arrows hangs from a nearby branch. To the left, Lakshmana attentively skins a black buck in preparation for a meal of roasted venison kebabs. The naturalistic modeling of graceful figures in soft colors, depicted against the undulating hills of the surrounding countryside, situate these mythic events within the region of the Punjab Hills.]

[IMAGE: The Sage's Wife Clothes Sita. India, Punjab Hills, Kangra, ca. 1780. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by the San Diego Museum of Art: Edwin Binney 3rd Collection. During their exile in the forest, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana arrive at the hermitage of the sage Atri, represented by a simple hut amidst trees draped with flowering vines. Seated beneath a tree, from which hangs a shawl, the meditating

sage is seen holding his prayer beads. The tranquility of the setting is further enhanced by the tame deer and the sacred tulsi (basil) plant. Within the hut, Sita meets with the sage's wife, Anasuya, herself an illustrious ascetic. Anasuya approves of Sita's accompanying Rama into the forest and blesses her with the gifts of heavenly raiment that will never wear out, fine jewelry, a garland, and an unguent that would guard against the rigors of the forest climate. We see Sita twice. In the first appearance she receives the gift of clothes from Anasuya and exchanges her leaf-and-bark dress for a red skirt and blue shawl; in her second appearance she displays the gift to Rama.]

Draupadi, heroine of the Mahabharata epic, is bold and forthright even in adversity. Her husband Yudhishthira succumbing to his weakness for gambling, stakes and loses all (in a rigged game), including his wife. Draupadi challenges the assembly and demands to know how it is possible for one who has staked and lost his own self to retain the right to wager her. Duryodhana, the winner of the bet, insists that Draupadi is indeed his to do with as he pleases and orders that she be disrobed. Furious at this insult to her honor, Draupadi loosens her coifed hair and vows that she will not knot it again until she has washed it in Duryodhana's blood. As she begins to disrobe, the more her sari is pulled away the longer it becomes. It is this event which turns Draupadi from a contented, but strong willed wife into a vengeful goddess.

[IMAGE: The Disrobing of Draupadi, attributed to Nainsukh (1710-1778). India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1765. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by the Howard Hodgkin Collection, London. In this evocation of a momentous scene from the Mahabharata epic, the imperious expression and outstretched arm of the Kaurava prince Duryodhana direct attention to the miracle unfolding below. Duryodhana's brother Dushasana forcibly attempts to disrobe Draupadi in the center of the assembly hall. Draupadi's husbands, the Pandavas, who have lost her as well as their kingdom in a crooked game of dice, sit helplessly to the right. As Dushasana repeatedly tries to strip Draupadi, Krishna's divine grace provides her with an unending length of material as a sari, thus sparing her further humiliation. The episode of the dice game and the disrobing of Draupadi is the most important drama enacted in an eighteen-night festival held in many towns and cities. This inauspicious event, which tarnishes Draupadi's honor, marks her metamorphosis from contented wife into vengeful goddess.]

[IMAGE: Draupadi and Ashvatthaman. India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, 1720-30. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Lent by a private collection. This story from the final part of the epic Mahabharata features Ashvatthaman, a Kaurava soldier who massacred Draupadi's sleeping sons in a loathsome and infamous manner. The Pandavas spare Ashvatthaman's life but punish him by removing the miraculous protective jewel crest that has been embedded in his forehead since birth. They also curse him to spend thousands of years in pain, shunned by humans and enveloped by the stench of decaying flesh. The painting shows Draupadi sitting with her husbands, the five Pandavas, within an orange chamber, her upraised hand indicating that she is speaking. Initially Draupadi demanded the death of the murderer but finally agreed to the lesser punishment out of respect of Ashvatthaman's father. Outside the pavilion, we see Ashvatthaman skulking away with his turban bedraggled and head bleeding from the removal of his jeweled crest.]

The third influential heroine and beloved is Radha, a cowherd whose story is narrated in the twelfth-century poem, *Gita Govinda* (Love Song of the Dark Lord). Having once experienced the ecstasy of divine love with Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu), Radha is separated from Krishna and yearns with single-minded intensity for reunion. In the *Gita Govinda* Radha is human and Krishna divine, and the poem is interpreted metaphorically in terms of the longing of the human soul for the divine. The final reunion symbolizes the bliss of salvation. By the sixteenth century, Radha was transformed into a goddess, and is honored as the heavenly queen of Krishna's celestial world.

[IMAGE: Lotus-Clad Radha and Krishna. India, Punjab Hills, Basohli, ca. 1730. Opaque watercolor on paper. Lent by the Girsjaran and Elvira Sidhu Collection. Clad entirely in lotus petals and sitting on lotus thrones, Radha and Krishna here gaze intently into each other's eyes. Images of Radha and Krishna in flower adornment (phulsajjya) are somewhat rare, and the absence of inscription to accompany such paintings prevents a precise definition of the significance of the iconographic formula. Lotuses, however, are multivalent symbols with a long history of use in the religious imagery of the Indian subcontinent. Since lotuses rise gleaming and fresh out of muddy ponds, they generally represent fertility and purity. The lotus-petal garments further suggest a common act of devotional worship through the offering of flowers to the gods. Within the specific context of the worship of Radha and Krishna, the lotus may refer to the blissful union of the two in the land of Brindavan, Krishna's childhood home. Pilgrimage maps often depicted Brindavan in the shape of a lotus. Radha's lotus braid is a charming extra detail added by the artist.]

[IMAGE: Radha and Krishna Entwined. India, state of West Bengal, 20th century. Bronze. Lent by Leo S. Figiel, M.D. This folk style image of Radha and Krishna indicates the extent to which their legend with its easy charm and immediate appeal, has spread through various levels of society in India. The image of Radha entwining herself around Krishna is a charming piece that captures the charismatic quality of their love. While Krishna plays upon his flute (now missing), Radha creeps up behind him and presses herself against him. She envelops him in embrace, wrapping one leg around him and drawing him close with both arms. This exquisitely modeled twosome is an arresting presentation of Radha's utterly rapturous love for Krishna.]

| [PREVIOUS](#) | [NEXT](#) |

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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Local Protector

As local protector of villages and towns and individual tribal peoples, Devi encompass local goddesses as well as local representations of goddesses whose aspects as cosmic force have already been noted. The Indian countryside is dotted with numerous wayside shrines that are often located at the threshold of villages. Except for those dedicated to local heroes these shrines are invariably "mata" or mother goddess shrines. Sometimes a "mata" shrine encloses nothing more than an earthen water pot with molded clay protrusions that symbolize the nourishing breasts of the goddess. At other times, a rock smeared with saffron and vermilion speaks of her presence. On occasion, a simply modeled stone image serves to invoke the deity. These goddesses, who are concerned only with local affairs, are all-important in the villages and tribal areas. They give an immediacy to worship that cannot be provided by the great male gods, Vishnu and Shiva, who are usually enshrined in temples in the major towns.

[IMAGE: Durga beneath a Sunburst Medallion. India, state of Himachal Pradesh, Kullu. 16th century. Bronze. Lent by Leo S. Figiel, M. D. Beneath a large sunburst medallion, a triumphant four-armed Durga stands over a decapitated buffalo. The zigzag shaft of her trident simulates a thunderbolt as it pierces the buffalo at her feet while her other hand holds the wretched demon Mahisha. An incongruously small lion attacks the buffalo's rear. This vigorous rendition of Durga with a disproportionately large head and short skirt is typical of the folk style of Himachal Pradesh in northern India. The large number of Durga images from this region are testimony to the high regard in which she is held.]

[IMAGE: Seven sisters on a pedestal. India, state of Madhya Pradesh, Bastar district, 19th century. Bronze. Lent by Leo S. Figiel, M.D. Seven female figures representing the seven sisters (sat-bahini) here stand in a row, their arms wrapped around one another's backs in folk-dance formation. Since prehistoric times the number seven has had mystical significance in India. It denotes multiplicity and plurality and is widely associated with cyclic renewal. In western India groups of seven water nymphs are propitiated to protect women from infertility and miscarriages. In southern India, the sapta kannagis (seven maidens) are considered the tutelary deities of water tanks. In tribal Bastar, where young people often live in dormitories called ghotul, the seven sisters are looked upon as protectors of adolescent girls. The divine maidens have individual names, which are often conferred as titles of honor upon the resident girls. These bronze figurines depicting the seven divine maidens may also refer to the girls engaged in ritual dances in their honor.]

[IMAGE: The Goddess Markama in the sanctum of her temple in Bissamcuttack. The goddess's face is covered with red powder and is decorated with silver eyes, tongue, and nose, as well as a diadem. There are seven swords placed on the stone image; one belongs to Markama's spouse, Niamraja, a deity of the Dongaria Kondh tribe. Photo by Cornelia Mallebrein, India, state of Orissa, Rayagada district, spring, 1997.]

The fluctuating imagery of local goddesses is dramatically exemplified in the tribal region of Bastar in central India, where bronze casters create images from personal dream visions of the deities. With such an individual approach, only the craftsman and the commissioning patron know a deity's precise identity. A favored Bastar mode for representing the goddesses is to model them seated upon a swing or within wheeled chariots.

[IMAGE: Durga with Her Family. India, state of West Bengal or Orissa, 17th-18th century. Bronze. Lent by Leo S. Figiel. M. D. In eastern India, Durga, the slayer of the buffalo demon, is also visualized as Uma, the consort of Shiva. When the goddess visits her parents' home during Durga Puja, a ten-day fall festival

especially popular in this region, she is accompanied by her children. In this bronze altar, the central figure of Durga slaying the buffalo demon is flanked by the goddesses Lakshmi and Sarasvati, envisioned in this region as Durga's daughters. Alongside are her sons, Kartikeya standing on his peacock and Ganesha seated on his rat. The griffin head given to Durga's lion is a regional characteristic. In this large and complex tableau, each figure is cast individually by the lost-wax process. It juxtaposes Durga's two contradictory roles--the divine destroyer of the demon and the affectionate daughter and mother.]

[IMAGE: Woman with parasol and pot. India, state of Orissa, Kondh tribe, late 20th century. Bronze. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Dr. Leo S. Figiel. S1997.138a-c. This female figure, unusually large for a Kondh bronze, is a fine example of Kondh craftsmanship, although it was unlikely to have been created for a ritual purpose. In recent years, size and weight have been the criteria by which to assess the value of bronzes made for other than ritual purposes. The surface is covered with the crisscross lattice texture typical of Kondh bronzes and the woman's braided hair and hairpins are depicted in minute detail. The umbrella and pot were cast separately and inserted into her hands. This bronze bears the Kondh woman's distinctive tattoo marks on cheeks, chin, and forehead, as well as multiple piercings of the earlobes. As a preparation for marriage, Kondh girls are tattooed at the age of ten, while even earlier, holes are pierced along the outer ear and earlobes to receive the earrings their bridegroom will one day give them.]

[IMAGE: Elongated goddess. India, state of Madhya Pradesh, Bastar district, 19th or 20th century. Bronze. Lent by Leo S. Figiel, M. D. The piquant proportions of this female figure, with its bold deliberate distortions of form, illustrate the sharp contrast that exists between depictions of deities within classical Hinduism and folk religion. Sculptors who make images for the traditional temples work according to textual prescriptions following strict guidelines for the physical proportions of deities, their adornment, and other iconographic details. Folk artisans are unfettered by any such regulations. Their work, believed to be inspired directly by the deities who appear in their dream visions, renders each piece unique. This figure may have been either an icon or equally a votive object that was offered to a goddess. Only the pedestal retains traces of the faint horizontal ribbing that is evidence of the wax-thread process typical of Bastar bronzes.]

A different type of visual representation and its accompanying belief is evident in the unique Bhuta cult practiced along India's southwestern coastal strip. The term "bhuta" refers to a group of divine spirits or supernatural beings who are generally benign but are also capable of causing misery requiring periodic propitiation and workshop. Local people refer to bhutas with awe and veneration. Close to four hundred individual bhutas are recognized of which a large number are female, referred to as Mothers.

[IMAGE: Female bhuta. India, state of Karnataka, coastal south Kanara, ca. 1800. Wood with traces of pigment. Lent by Dr. Siddharth Bhansali. This small, stocky image of a bhuta, or supernatural spirit, may represent the goddess Chikku (literally, small one), a petite, demure figure who is reportedly today's favorite bhuta. She is abundantly ornamented with her hair drawn straight back to hang as a heavy plait, and her strikingly stylized facial features give her an air of austere grandeur. A bowl of sacred ash, known as vighuti, rests in her upraised hand.]

[IMAGE: Female bhuta. India, state of Karnataka, coastal south Kanara, 19th century. Bronze. Lent by Dr. Siddharth Bhansali. This image with hands joined in a gesture of adoration is usually in home shrines situated in a room at the rear of the house. Only on festival days would such an image be taken out of its seclusion and brought into the square where the Koolam dance is performed. This bhuta has a wide, infectious smile, elaborate jewelry, a topknot pulled to one side of the head, and a skirt whose swirling

movement are ingeniously depicted.]

| [PREVIOUS](#) | [NEXT](#) |

| [Devi Homepage](#) | [Text Only](#) |

| [Who is Devi](#) | [Aspects of Devi](#) | [Interpreting Devi](#) | [Tantric Devi](#) | [For Kids](#) | [Resources](#) |

| [Sackler Homepage](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) |

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