

VISHNU

Hinduism's Blue-Skinned Savior



Edited by Joan Cummins

With contributions by

Doris Meth Srinivasan
Leslie C. Orr
Cynthia Packert
Neeraja Poddar

Frist Center for the Visual Arts

In association with

Mapin Publishing



Multiplicity and Grandeur

An Introduction to Vishnu

Joan Cummins

A beautiful male figure sleeps peacefully on a giant serpent, dreaming the universe into being.

A ferocious creature, half-human, half-lion, bursts from a pillar and tears the entrails from a demon.

A level-headed prince enlists an army of monkeys and bears to help save his kidnapped wife.

A charming infant steals butter from the churns of milkmaids.

All of these characters, large and small, fierce and gentle, are manifestations of a single divine force, the Hindu god Vishnu. When these personae are depicted in paintings, they share the same distinctive skin tone: a dusky shade of blue. But beyond this trait, mutual characteristics are difficult to discern. Vishnu has been described as Hinduism's most peaceful, moderate, and compassionate deity, but in some forms he is downright frenzied and bloodthirsty. The many manifestations of Vishnu reveal the god's intellectual, physical, and moral powers, and they illustrate the god's genuine concern for the universe he created, but they differ so radically from one another in form and temperament that it hardly seems possible that they sprang from the same source.

In Hindu mythology Vishnu is first and foremost a savior, sweeping down from his lofty abode to bring peace and balance to a beleaguered earth. Sometimes he remains in his heavenly form when saving the day: four-armed, holding a discus and a conch shell, and riding on his man-eagle, Garuda. But more often, he assumes an earthly form appropriate to the precise task at hand. These temporary manifestations are called avatars (Sanskrit *avatara*). In Hinduism, the great deities are said to be boundless in size and influence, nonspecific in character or form or location because they embody all things and concepts. With an avatar, that omnipresent force distills itself into a bodily form so it can descend to earth. Although Hindu legends tell of many different deities mingling with humankind on various occasions, the avatar is truly the *modus operandi* of Vishnu, and the term is used almost exclusively to refer to his exploits. Vishnu becomes a giant fish (*Matsya*), a vengeful Brahmin (*Parashurama*), or some other character, not always charitable in nature but necessary to the maintenance of order in the cosmos.



mostly in and around niches located at the center of each exterior wall, and around the shrine doorway. Over time, the basic structure was elaborated with bump-outs on the exterior walls, creating staggered surfaces onto which more and more sculpture was introduced. This elaboration can be seen by comparing the eighth-century Vishnu temple at Osian (fig. 3) to the eleventh-century Devi Jagadamba temple at Khajuraho (fig. 4).⁷ The vast majority of Indian stone sculpture in museums—and in this exhibition—comes from the exterior of temple buildings that have fallen into ruins.

When visiting a structural temple, a worshipper often begins by walking around the exterior, usually in a clockwise direction. He or she admires and briefly invokes the various deities displayed on the walls. On Vishnu temples these exterior images might depict the avatars or other important legends of the god, as seen in figures 2 and 3. Or the outer images might depict Shiva and Brahma in a brief iconographic acknowledgment of other deities. In either case, the images on the outside are usually understood to be extensions or emanations of the god enshrined within, who manifests himself in many forms, large and small. Many Vishnu temples have an image of the man-eagle Garuda,

Figure 3 | Trivikrama image in central niche, Vishnu Temple 1, Osian, Rajasthan, 8th century, partial view of the exterior from the south. Photograph by Joan Carreras



Figure 4 | Jagadamba Temple, Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, c. 1025; partial view of the exterior from the southwest. Photograph by Joan Carreras

Vishnu's mount, installed in front, facing into the temple. It is common practice to stop and pray to Garuda before going inside. In more elaborate temple complexes, one might stop in several smaller shrines to pay homage to various gods before moving on to the main temple. This is particularly true in the South, where temples can stretch for acres within enclosures entered via monumental gateways, called *gopurams* (see fig. 5).

After a brief journey past the subsidiary images, the visitor's mind is prepared for the main ritual of worship, known as *puja*, so he or she enters the temple and approaches the sanctum. The interior of the building is much darker and less elaborate, so the worshipper can concentrate solely on the icon installed on the altar. That icon might be stone or bronze, or there might be several icons in various media (as in fig. 6). *Puja* begins by calling the god to be present in the icon, which is understood as his temporary body, after which the worshipper makes offerings of food, fire, and flowers. Sometimes the worshipper touches the icon, anointing it or draping it with garlands. Often the icon has been dressed and only its face is readily visible. Prayers consist of praise and requests. Then the god is given leave, and the ritual is over. The process is understood as a meeting in which the mere act of seeing and being seen by the god—known as *darshan*—brings insight and spiritual merit.

Relatively few of the stone sculptures in this exhibition are likely to have received *puja*. Most were probably part of the large display of subsidiary images that were honored