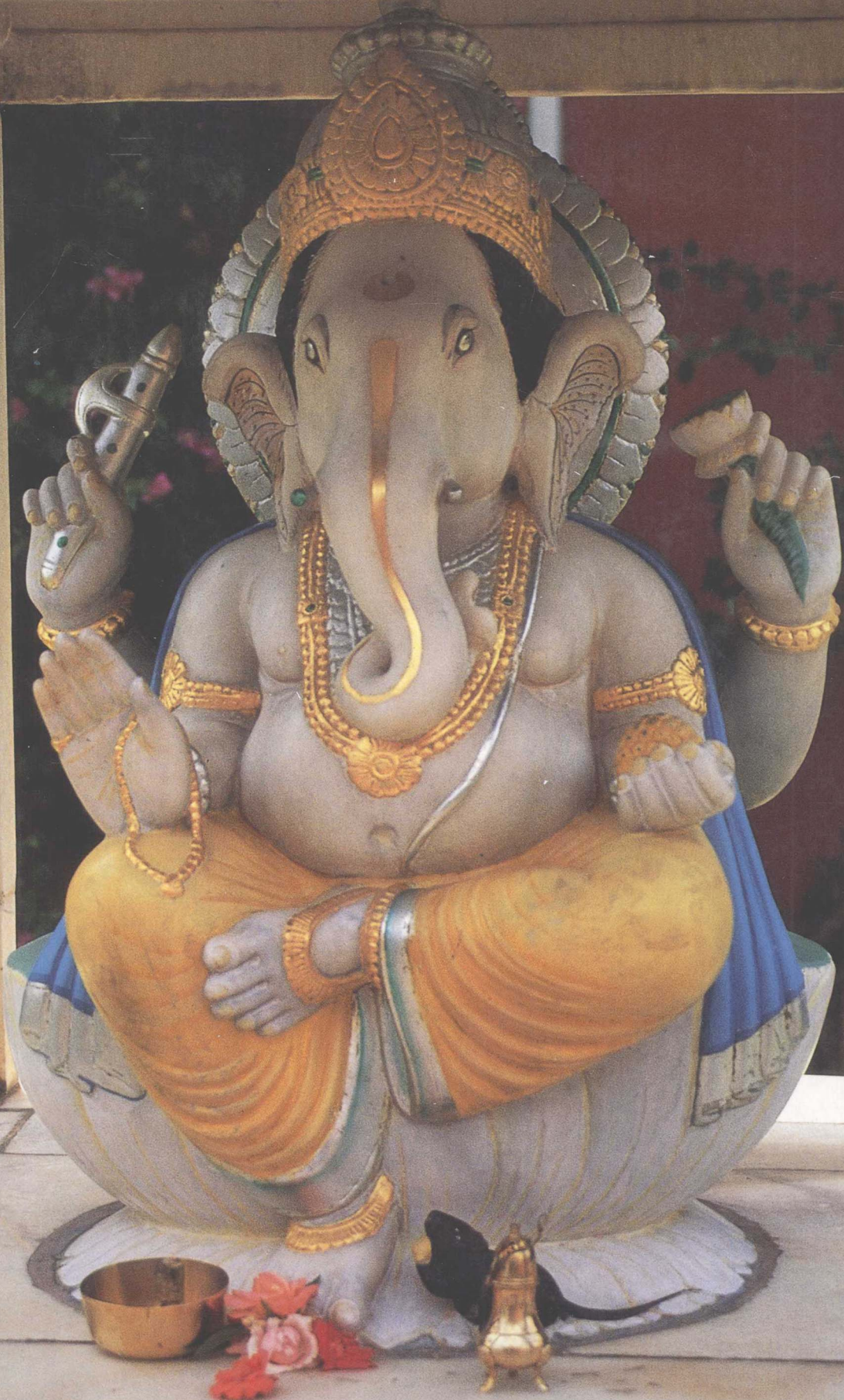


Forms
of the
Formless

The Hindu Vision

Alistair
Sheare



Alistair Shearer

The Hindu Vision

Forms of the Formless

with 165 illustrations, 15 in color

Thames and Hudson



*From the knowledge of Art arises divine knowledge,
and such knowledge leads to Enlightenment.
This liberation is truly the essence of the knowledge of Art.
He who realizes this, attains freedom.*

VASTU SUTRA UPANISHAD

ART AND IMAGINATION

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© 1993 Thames and Hudson Ltd, London

First published in the United States of America in 1993 by
Thames and Hudson Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue,
New York, New York 10110

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 93-60423

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ISBN 0-500-81043-5

Printed and bound in Singapore

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The Hindu View of Life

As space pervades a jar both inside and out, so within and beyond this ever-changing universe, there exists one Universal Spirit. SHIVA SAMHITA

To understand the premises of Hindu art, we have to jettison our modern insistence on the importance of the individual and the rational values of scientific materialism, and place ourselves back in the theocentric world-view of medieval Europe. In the Middle Ages the role of the artist was to portray and reinforce the shared symbolic order that had guided Western man since the advent of Christianity. This order derived from what was called the Great Chain of Being, a universal coherence which stabilized individual and collective life as part of a divinely ordained hierarchy linking humanity with God. In England this idea of a cosmic hierarchy, which persisted until well into the Victorian period, is expressed perhaps most clearly in the works of Shakespeare: when Macbeth murders King Duncan under his own roof, the act is a most unnatural deed not only because it violates the sacred duty of hospitality, but because in killing the hereditary head of state, he has violated the natural order that the institution of kingship both reflects and perpetuates. As a result of this violation of Cosmic Law, all sorts of unnatural things happen: storms blow up across the land, falcons are killed by owls, aristocratic horses tear each other to pieces. Until very recently, the preservation of the whole, with its apparent disregard for the pursuits of the individual, was particularly a feature of Hindu society, structured as it was by the reciprocal hierarchy of the caste system.

In Indian civilization, the operation of Cosmic Law is enshrined in what the West calls Hinduism and the Indians call *Sanatana Dharma* – ‘the Eternal Law’. There is in fact no word in Indian languages to signify ‘religion’ as a discrete or separate social function. *Sanatana Dharma* is a complete way of life, regulating and governing the evolution of the individual from conception to death, life after reincarnating life, and to act in accord with the prescriptions of *Sanatana Dharma* is to live in accord with the law of Nature herself. The role of the artist in this vast scheme of things is thus not to redraw the parameters of possibility in perception or expression, or to criticize the inherited tradition or society, but rather to create those time-honoured forms which reiterate, glorify and perpetuate the Cosmic Law that upholds all life.

The levels of life

Most Westerners are baffled by the myriad apparent contradictions of Hinduism, which ranges with maddening ease from primitive cults of blood sacrifice to the most sophisticated systems of metaphysical speculation and mystical experience. This extraordinary variety of belief and practice is partly explicable by history. When the Aryan tribes, nomadic and imageless, entered India some time around 2000 BC, they found an indigenous settled culture – the Dravidians – that worshipped the Earth Mother in many forms and images and, at the most popular stratum, practised the irrepressible animism that persists even today throughout South and South East Asia, celebrating the continual epiphanies of nature – in rock, river, tree and snake.

The Aryans brought with them the Sanskrit language, reverence for the cow, and a complex body of sacrificial ritual. Their religious knowledge was encoded

Shiva Vishvapaharana, the
Destroyer of the Poison of Time.
South India, 10th century.

in the *Vedas*, an oral tradition of chants which record mystical cognitions of the inmost structure and workings of the universe, and which have remained the backbone of *Sanatana Dharma*. As time progressed, a plurality of sects arose, each concentrating on one aspect of the Supreme, each with its rituals and mythologies. The resultant variety of belief and practice, though confusing to the Western mind, is not self-contradictory; rather, it is like the many facets of the one scintillating diamond. Indeed, it is this diversity that makes India the living museum of the human mind and has given its civilization such an extraordinary richness. Every striving of the human spirit has found its place in the spacious mansion of *Sanatana Dharma*.

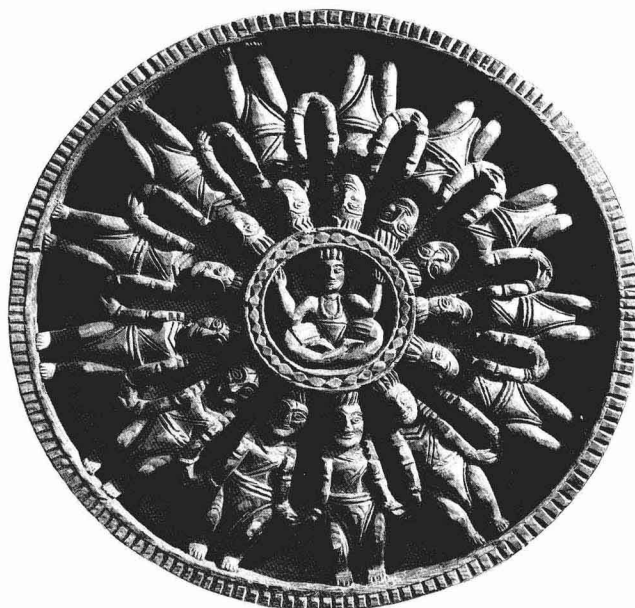
The Many Gods, the One Source

Despite its incorrigible plurality, Hinduism is not as rampantly polytheistic as it appears. At its heart lies a vision of the universe as a seamless unity, the manifestation of a Supreme Consciousness. The most celebrated expression of this non-dualistic vision is the spiritual teaching known as *Advaita Vedanta*, systematized in the eighth century AD by the enlightened teacher Shankara, and it is from the perspective of *Vedanta* that all the theories of art and image-making derive.

According to *Vedanta*, the entire universe is alive, structured as an ever-changing field of vibrating energy that is the manifestation of the Supreme Consciousness known as *brahman* – ‘the Unbounded’. All the myriad aspects of creation, the ‘world of name and form’ (*nama-rupa*), are nothing but the temporary and unbinding modifications of this Consciousness, from which they are generated, in which they inhere, by which they are all maintained as they pass through their changes, and into which they eventually disappear. As the source and essence of all phenomena, the Unbounded remains unaffected by its creations: ‘Weapons cannot cut It, fire cannot burn It, water cannot wet It, nor wind dry It away’ as the most popular text of *Sanatana Dharma*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, says.

This transcendental infinity of life, like the Godhead of Christian mysticism, is not directly accessible to worship, but its radiance is refracted through a series of ever denser levels in a continuum of vibration ranging from the transcendent through the subtle to the gross. As human beings we usually inhabit the grossest levels, only dimly aware of the possibilities that lie beyond the range of our senses as they normally operate. But our capacity to experience can be enormously expanded by various contemplative, physiological and affective disciplines – yoga, meditation, dietary regimens – for mind, like matter, is merely a point of particular density in the continuum of energy. The primary purpose of both religious and artistic endeavour is to refine and develop the mind’s ability to perceive the subtle depths of life and ultimately the one Consciousness – *brahman* – in which all life inheres. Thus Hindu art is grounded in what the Indians call knowledge of reality (*vidya*) and the West would call mystical experience.

According to Hinduism, life is a continuing process of spiritual alchemy whereby the individual being, through countless incarnations, is gradually purified in the fire of experience to the point where he or she can consciously reunite with *brahman*, the matrix of all life. The Sanskrit term used to describe creation and the journey of the soul is *lila*, ‘the divine play’, using the word in



Mandala of deity and humans.
Kashmir.

both its joyful and its dramatic senses. In truth, the universe is nothing more or less than the Divine playing an elaborate game of hide-and-seek with itself. For us humans too, the world is a stage, and each of us plays our brief, allotted part to the best of our ability. According to how well we learn the necessary lessons and pass the necessary tests of each incarnation, we proceed to the next life, the next role in the cosmic drama that unfolds through all eternity. And no matter how grim life may appear from the point of view of the isolated individual, whose present situation is the result of past actions (*karma*), from the perspective of the Divine it is always blissful. As the *Taittiriya Upanishad* exuberantly proclaims, 'From joy all beings are born; by joy all beings are sustained; and into joy all beings again return.' That this is the true nature of things will not be clear to us until we accomplish the purpose of incarnation in a human body, which is to transcend our customary limitations set by habit and ignorance, and realize our identity with the Divine from which all life springs. Artistic creation plays a crucial role in this process of discovery: the image provides, for both its creator and its worshipper, a means for the Divine to come to know itself again.

The realms of the gods

Sanatana Dharma, in harmony with ancient wisdom the world over, teaches that there are four interdependent areas of life: the gross, the subtle, the causal and the transcendent. The gross is based on the subtle, the subtle on the causal and the causal on the transcendent, which is the source of all. The deeper the level of life, the more potential it contains. Analogously, modern science tells us that matter is structured in interpenetrating layers – the molecular, atomic and sub-atomic – with increasing power at each level. Cultural life serves to bridge the gap between the relatively gross level of mankind, restricted within boundaries of time, space and causation, and the transcendent Divine, which is unbounded and eternally free. As the expression of the subtler and more refined levels, cultural activity is thus analogous to the intermediate world of fantasy that the child establishes between himself as an isolated body-ego and an increasingly



Head of the goddess Durga.
Orissa, 18th century.

distant mother. The subtle levels – the invisible realms that form the unconscious springs of our thoughts and actions – are the abode of the hidden energies, the unseen laws of nature that control, modulate and sustain our daily lives. It is the myriad aspects and operations of the Divine – the laws of nature through which it manifests the world of particulars – that are personified as the deities of the Hindu pantheon. At the causal level of life lie the basic forces of creation, preservation and transformation, personified by the principal deities Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. A fourth major deity, the Goddess, combines the attributes of all three in her various forms. The subtle realms are personified in minor gods, goddesses and discarnate beings. On the macrocosmic level the deities embody the operations of the Cosmic will, conducting and sustaining the evolution of life. In the microcosm, holding court in the luminous caverns of the unconscious, they represent the myriad possibilities of the human personality, brilliantly dramatizing all the ways of being that are open to us.

The Sanskrit word for deity is *deva* – ‘being of light’. Hindus acknowledge not only major and minor deities, each with its different forms and aspects, but numerous other intelligences: demigods, spirits, attendants, and a whole host of infernal and celestial creatures. They inhabit an infinitely fluid universe: each member of this huge retinue of subtle beings can interact with other members and the human world, just as in our daily lives events, thoughts and feelings weave often unsuspected or unnoticed patterns. Thus demons can win boons from the gods by prolonged worship and penance; humans can contact and utilize the strength of *devas*; elemental beings flit in and out of the human realm, taking whatever shape or form suits their fancy or their purposes. This elasticity of the imagination is a constant feature of the Hindu world-view.

‘But are the deities *real*?’ asks the rational mind. To which the answer is that there are any number of different ‘realities’ within the relative universe; only the unbounded Consciousness, in which they all inhere, is Reality. What is certain is that our normal, socially agreed reality as perceived by the gross senses is only a tiny fraction of what exists. As regards the sense of sight, for example, science tells us that greater sensitivity to the electromagnetic spectrum would give us X-ray vision into the world around us; infra-red vision would turn our environment into a warm cluster of shining lights; sensitivity to yet longer wavelengths would render our visual field as a field of television waves, and so on. In fact, beings in subtle bodies help or hinder us constantly, according to their nature. Just because we cannot see them does not mean that they do not exist.

‘And are the deities projections of the mind or objectively outside us?’ The answer is: both – it depends on our viewpoint. They are experienced as outside our individual ego – just as the outside world or our own unconscious is felt by the ego to be ‘other’ – but, as our consciousness expands, and we realize our true nature to be that unbounded Consciousness in which everything exists, they are apprehended to be within us, as is everything else in the universe. This vision of the world as it really is, in which the isolated sense of ‘egoity’ is seen to be a fiction fostered by countless generations of ignorance, is the perspective of Enlightenment. The *Ashtavakra Gita*, one of the seminal texts of *Advaita Vedanta*, describes this revolutionary perspective: ‘The waves constituting the universe spontaneously arise and disappear in you, who are yourself the unbounded ocean of Consciousness. You suffer no loss or gain.’

The exploits of the subtle beings are not regarded as ‘mythical’ in the Western sense, i.e. unreal; or if they are, then we and everything else are equally unreal!

To the Hindu, our distinction between myth and history, legend and fact, is arbitrary, for the outer world of 'reality' and the inner world of 'imagination' are equally real, continuously influencing and shaping each other, being mutually interdependent polarities in a unified field that is itself the dream of the Divine. In this field myth operates as the ancient archetype of possible behaviour, which is acted out in various permutations throughout all time; myth is the general and educative pattern of which history, both individual and collective, is a particular example. So within every myth lies a profound truth about life, hidden in what the Hindus call *sandhya bhasha*, 'the twilight language' that protects sacred knowledge from those untutored in its proper use.

The infinitely complex web of relationships that is the universe operates through a network of correspondences that connect each part of the whole and link the subtle to the gross levels. The system operates as a vast hologram, any individual part of which contains the image of the whole and is imbued with the energy of the whole. Thus each deity, itself an aspect of the universal Consciousness, is at the same time intimately associated with the world of particulars through its connection with a specific element (*bhuta*), sense (*indriya*), name (*nama*), form (*rupa*), sound (*mantra*), colour (*rasa*), diagrammatic representation (*yantra*), symbol (*linga*), and so on.

It is through these media that the deities, the causal energies of our world, manifest: they are the 'body' of beings that are themselves immaterial. In popular Hinduism the devotee chooses whichever aspect of the Supreme suits his or her psychological and emotional needs. Traditionally, a devout believer will worship three types of deity: the local deity (*gramadevata*), the family deity (*kuladevata*), and the personal deity (*ishtadevata*). On the most popular level, images are considered as magical presences with supernatural abilities, and as such radiate divine energy into the community. At a personal level, an image can serve to expand one's perspective, acting as a daily reminder either of the invisible celestial realms and one's own potential divinity, or, at the same time, of the essentially contingent nature of the world and one's own littleness.

To ignore the realm of the *devas* is foolish in the extreme; to do so is to act like the gardener who tries to tend a wilting plant while forgetting to water the roots on which its health depends. In any case, there is nothing we can think or do that does not depend on these laws of nature. The intelligent thing is to begin to work in harmony with them. This knowledge of dealing with the very roots of life is the prerogative of the priest (*brahmin*), who is the technician of the sacred, and it is from the sacred scriptures that the rules of proportion, style and correct treatment of the images derive.

Hindu Art and the West

As a man is, so he sees. WILLIAM BLAKE

Despite, or perhaps because of, its exalted aims, there is something in the very nature of Hindu art which makes it impenetrable, bewildering, or even repugnant to the average Westerner. We are faced with a maze for which we lack an Ariadne's thread, an art inextricably embedded in a religious and cultural matrix which appears almost unbelievably complicated and alien.

This lack of receptivity is attributable to habits of mind that have taken millennia to mature. Aesthetically, we in the West are the heirs of the European Renaissance and a Classical standard of beauty based squarely on the human figure. To the Greeks the beauty and proportions of the human form enshrined more than just aesthetic value: Man was considered the 'measure of all things' and the perfection of the human body was believed to lead to moral, even godlike, perfection. Indeed, the cult of the male body achieved religious status, celebrated communally in such institutions as the Olympic games, which, forbidden to women even as spectators, was an initiatory test of young men that served the additional political function of expressing the unity of Greek civilization. However idealized the canon of beauty set by the Greeks may have been, it belonged squarely to the world of flesh and blood, faithfully recording the taut sinews of a daylight, human reality.

Hindu art, by contrast, is in no way anthropocentric. It celebrates not the perfectibility of man, but the already perfect realms of the gods; it eschews the clear certainties of daylight reality and floats in the shadowy enigmas of the dream; it pays homage not to the rationality of the world of the extroverted senses, but to the irrationality of an oneiric and invisible realm opened up by inward contemplation. Its figures are androgynously sensuous, celebrating a beauty not seen on earth.

Aesthetic differences are the expression of deeper cultural and religious ones. The European Renaissance attempted to combine the ideals of pagan humanism with the Judeo-Christian stress on human history as evidence of a covenant between a particular chosen people and their single personal God through his unique Son, their saviour. Hinduism, by contrast, deals in time-spans which are geological and astronomical rather than historical; the linear history of humanity, let alone one race, is held as nothing against the vastness of the cosmic cycles of manifestation and dissolution that occur time and again without end. And to limit the irruption of the Divine in human affairs to a unique historical figure would strike the Hindu as limited in the extreme.

In the progressive forging of our modern world-view, Judeo-Christian and Renaissance values were recast in the cold Northern light of Protestantism. Luther's Reformation drew on a distrust of the mystical experience already evinced in the Old Testament, where only Moses was allowed to have seen God face to face. Judaism abhorred the 'graven image', and the duty of the believer was to follow the teaching of the Prophets and obey the Law in the circumscribed realms of family, society and work. Thus the Reformation jettisoned priestly hierarchy, the 'impracticality' of contemplative life, the mystical use of ritual and images. Protestantism, the father of the modern world, is essentially a masculine world-view, dominated by the attributes of the left cerebral hemisphere, with its emphasis on rational and temporal perceptions and verbal and intellectual abilities. Our secularized world, endorsing the virtues of individualism, sobriety, hard work and scientific materialism, is the result. Behind this world-view lay the myth of unsullied objectivity, whereby Man stands apart from the mechanistic processes of Nature and She is there to do his bidding.

Hinduism and its art springs from a very different world view. Dominated by a bias to the right cerebral hemisphere, it is predominantly feminine, with its emphasis on the intuitive and the irrational, its flowing plasticity and disregard for fixed boundaries. Always strongly oriented around the group, family or



Woman with children. Orissa,
13th century.

caste, Indian society never created a scientific or technical revolution, remaining obstinately wedded to the sacred and the subjective. For all its abstract concerns, Hindu art never tires of celebrating the innocent, telluric power of animal and plant. 'Plants, oh you mothers, I salute you as goddesses' hymns the Yajur Veda; and just as our Earth, the Mother Goddess Prithivi – 'the widely-spread one' – is guiltless, so her creations are without sin, divine.

The richness of form and unregenerate sensuousness of Hindu art spring from a tropical sensibility that acknowledges the utterly invincible power of Nature and mocks our desire to order her creation. It is of the irrepressible fecundity of the jungle, rather than the austerity of the desert, that so much Hindu art reminds us. Its defined spaces surge with an exuberance of polytheistic form striving to emerge, like the bursting forth of vegetation after the monsoon rains. Swaying figures, their limbs smooth as sap-filled plant stems, writhe and twist in serpentine undulation; fantastic bodies sprout multiple heads and limbs like the unfolding of some exotic and lushly-petalled flower.

The *Shilpa Shastras* – the classical Hindu texts on the arts – emphasize a figure's unity with the surrounding matrix of organic life. Details mimic the universal forms of the animal and vegetal worlds, both considered more enduring, and thus ultimately more real, than the human realm. Faces should follow the perfect oval of an egg; eyebrows describe the curve of a drawn bow; eyes mimic the shapes of lotus petals or fish. The shoulders are modelled on the elephant, the trunk on the lion, and so on. To the Indian mind, man grows out of the elemental structure of the cosmos no more and no less than the plants and beasts. The universe is not subject to Man; Man is seen in the image of the universe. He is a participator, not a controller, ultimately as powerless as any other creature to resist the great organic tides of birth, growth, decay and death.

The effect of these cultural and aesthetic differences can be traced in the history of the West's reactions to Hindu art. The word that crops up most frequently in the early European descriptions of Hindu art is 'monstrous'. For Hindu art, with its many-limbed and hybrid figures, reminded Europe of the medieval visions of Hell, the Antichrist and the Apocalypse. Against this background, the Hindu gods in their baroque extravagance appeared to Christians as demonic creatures from a nightmarish realm where all natural boundaries had been transgressed and the light of the one true religion had yet to shine.

Until the late nineteenth century, relatively few people had actually been to India, and the popular imagination had been fed on a tradition of fantastic travellers' tales of the mysterious East in a tradition stretching back to the days of Pliny and Herodotus. Ludovico di Varthema, whose travels took him from his native Bologna to South India between 1503 and 1508, gives us the following description of an image of a fierce deity in a royal temple he visited in Calicut:

This chapel is two paces wide in each of the four sides, and three paces high, with doors covered with devils carved in relief. In the midst of this chapel there is a devil made of metal, placed in a seat also made of metal. The said devil has a crown made like that of the papal kingdom, with three crowns; it has also four horns and four teeth with a very large mouth, nose and most terrible eyes. The hands are made like those of a flesh-hook and the feet like those of a cock; so that he is a fearful object to behold. All the pictures around the said chapel are those of devils, and on each side of it there is a

Sathanas [i.e. Satan] seated in a seat, which seat is placed in a flame of fire, wherein are a great number of souls, of the length of half a finger and a finger of the hand. And the said Sathanas holds a soul in his mouth with the right hand and with the other seizes a soul by the waist.

Such lurid descriptions were commonly circulated and breathlessly repeated in travel accounts; the English gentleman traveller Sir Thomas Herbert was not unusual in repeating Varthema's description almost verbatim more than a hundred years later, and passing it off as his own. Other sixteenth-century travellers, such as the Portuguese botanist Garcia da Orta and the Florentine Andrea Corsali, reacted more positively; both were genuinely appreciative of the cave temple dedicated to Shiva on Elephanta Island off Bombay.

The first glimmerings of a more objective view began to emerge with the study of other cultures that accompanied the scientific revolution. In the eighteenth century, scholars re-examining the Classical heritage with a view to understanding the suppressed pagan traditions of antiquity found parallels between ancient Greek and Hindu myths which suggested India was not totally foreign to the Western psyche. Similarities between the great gods of ecstasy East and West – Shiva and Dionysos – and shared beliefs in the celebration of sexuality and the instinctive particularly intrigued the English theorist Richard Payne Knight, whose psychoanalytical approach, concerned with content rather than just aesthetics, was the first intelligent attempt to understand Hindu art on anything approaching its own terms. A small but intrepid band of Europeans began the vast task of studying Indian art: the French Sanskritist A. H. Anquetil-Duperron conducted a detailed and appreciative study of the caves at Ellora; the Danish natural historian and scientist Carsten Niebuhr alerted Europe to the Elephanta temple with his examination of its groundplan and sculptural panels; and a brilliant young member of the French Academy of Sciences, Le Gentil de La Galasière, produced accurate drawings of both iconography and temples that created much interest among European intellectuals, including Voltaire.

But as Britain's hold on India consolidated in the nineteenth century, Victorian art critics and scholars alike were almost unanimous in their hostility to Indian art. The vehemence of their denunciations reveals an extraordinary irrationality. A spokesman for the age was John Ruskin, who was genuinely convinced of the moral superiority of Christianity and of the material superiority of the West at its best. Grudgingly admitting that the 'Indians, and other semi-civilised nations, can colour better than we do' (*Modern Painters*, 1856), Ruskin concurred with a general agreement that India had produced a fine tradition of craftsmanship and decorative minor arts, an impression strengthened by the Indian displays at the Great Exhibition in 1851. But like other Victorian critics he felt that Hindu India lacked the moral fibre to aspire to 'high art', i.e. an art based on the empirical study of nature.

Ruskin attacked Hindu art because 'if it represents any living creature, it represents that living creature under some distorted and monstrous form. To all facts and forms of nature it wilfully opposes itself: it will not draw a man but an eight-armed monster; it will not draw a flower but only a spiral or a zig-zag.' The creators of such art, he concludes, 'lie bound in the dungeon of their own corruption, encompassed only by doleful phantoms, or by spectral vagrancy'. Such judgments were, unfortunately, the norm.



Durga slaying the buffalo demon.
Mysore, 13th century.

There were, of course, exceptions, individuals whose eyes and hearts were not closed through religious prejudice, chauvinism or fear of the unfamiliar. The Gothic Revival that Ruskin championed, which was responsible for revitalizing and intensifying the practice of Christianity in the nineteenth century, had a paradoxical consequence: with the new serious interest in medieval forms came an awareness that art, in the Middle Ages, was a form of devotion – and this led some thinkers to view Indian art in a more favourable light. Foremost among its champions were Henry Cole, George Birdwood and E. B. Havell. To their names should be added that of William Morris, who, as an outspoken critic of Victorian industrialism and economic imperialism, was also a vociferous supporter of both India's art and her villagers. It was Morris who, with a gift of a fine bronze of Hanuman, the Hindu monkey-god, inaugurated the collection of Indian bronzes in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which is still one of the greatest in the world.

Indian art fared little better for much of the twentieth century, when the prevailing orthodoxy was Modernism, an aesthetic which, following Mies van der Rohe's famous dictum that 'less is more', had no time for historical or symbolic references and non-functional form. Ornament, such a feature of Hindu art, was particularly taboo. In his essay 'Ornament and Crime' (1908), Adolf Loos, the Austrian pioneer of Modernism, castigated ornament as being suitable only for children, criminals or savages, being 'degenerate for modern man'. He declared that 'ornament is wasted labour... It itself commits a crime by damaging men's health, the national economy and cultural development.' It is really only since the late 1960s, a time of psychic looseness and visual exuberance in the popular arts, that the sumptuous strangeness that typifies so much Hindu art has come to be one of an almost infinite range of tastes permissible in the free-floating plurality of the post-modern world.

But the message of Hindu art goes far deeper than mere fashion; it is the expression of a level of tranquillity that is almost unknown to the modern mind, chronically overstimulated by a plethora of advertisements, images and printed words, and generally unable to maintain a prolonged attention span. Hindu art demands a receptive quietness for its appreciation, for its images were created, and at their best can still evoke, a time of perceptual innocence when the pristine immediacy of form was still vibrant, and an image had the power to penetrate deep into the viewer's consciousness and effect a transformation there. Born in a society with relatively few sources of artificial visual stimulation, the art of Hinduism positively relishes the depiction of the dazzling richness of perceptual possibilities. It appeals both to the eye and the mind: unashamedly sensuous, it is also highly intellectual, conveying interlocking levels of esoteric meaning that rely heavily on a recondite vocabulary of symbols, allusions and word-plays. Simultaneously luscious and literary, it caters to both the people and their priests.

Sculpture

Part of the appeal of a Western Classical sculpture is that it represents a moment frozen in time. Our humanity, so noble yet so frail, is granted a poignant moment of immortality, as in a photograph: *ars longa, vita brevis*. Indian sculpture, by contrast, exists in the timelessness of Being, simply at rest within its own fullness, surrounded by silence. Even as dynamic a piece as the



Shiva as Lord of the Cosmic Dance. South India, 10th century.

Dancing Shiva is not caught in the moment of dance, as for example the Apollo Belvedere is caught in the moment of stretching out his arm, suspended for all time. With Shiva, dancing is shown as his elemental state. There is no history, no temporal boundary here: Shiva as the eternal Cosmic Energy is the creator of Time itself, yet while continuously dancing the universe, he remains somehow perfectly balanced: simultaneously still and active, ever transcendent to what he creates.

Moreover, much Western art since the Renaissance compels our attention in a way that presupposes there is a viewer there to appreciate its beauty. Like the Mona Lisa's teasing smile, it is directed at the viewer, aiming to engage his or her ego. An Indian piece, by contrast, is sublimely oblivious to the viewer. It has no need of our mortal gaze, and defies spatial boundaries by looking right through us, back to the rarefied celestial realm from which it comes and to which it rightly belongs.

If the Hindu work defies our striving for visual contact, it also frustrates our attempts to analyse. Just as a sentence can be parsed to unfold its full richness, so much Western classical sculpture is amenable to an interactive, linear analysis of its components that can gradually lead to an appreciation of the subject as a whole. But analysis of a Hindu sculpture will reveal only a list of its component particulars. The drapery does not follow the human pattern of ordering the personal appearance and emphasizing the natural structural elements of the body; the many attributes, weapons and objects in its hands, each with their symbolic meaning, do not contribute to the overall stylistic orchestration of the piece. They act instead – as with a medieval devotional image – as an abstract, secondary grid superimposed on the primary figure, the purpose of which is to lead the eye and mind to transcend the limits of the visual, concrete form. The visual progression afforded by the contrast of separately articulated elements, delineated by light and shadow, is not there in a Hindu piece; instead there is a holistic presence whose integral stability derives, as we shall see, from a type of 'subtle body' rather than the garb, limbs or ornaments. The result is a single and irreducible unit of Being, an 'all-at-onement' that demands and encourages a quiet receptivity in the eye and mind of the viewer.

Painting

The area of Indian art that pays most attention to the secular is painting, of which the fullest account is the *Vishnudharmottara* (c. seventh century AD). Yet even this text, having dealt with the theory of types, methods and ideals, then proceeds to explain how to make the correct forms of more than eighty deities, so as to be in actual contact with them and have them mingle in the world of men.

The different concerns of European and Indian painters can be seen in their respective attitudes to the 'objective' world. Subjects that have been fundamental to the evolution of European painting since the Renaissance were virtually ignored in India, which produced no genre of the secular female nude, and virtually no portraits or landscapes. What little portraiture there is, mainly of princely families, was derived from the traditions of Islamic and European invaders. Representation of landscape exists only in a very limited way, and there is no attempt to achieve either the topographical realism or the romantic

depiction of the 'sublime' found in Europe. In fact, many miniatures approximate to the Western abstract rather than landscape tradition: their wonderfully sure blocks of colour, boldly juxtaposed, create a world of tonal relationships more pregnant with possible meanings than any figurative representation could be.

Landscapes in Hindu miniatures are symbolic rather than naturalistic, their constituent elements depicting the subjective mood or situation of the characters in the scene. Thus the cowgirl Radha, awaiting her lover Krishna in the forest grove, will sit under a sky heavy with oppressive rain clouds, which symbolize her suffocating sexual passion that longs for release. This connection between one's inner world and outer environment, expressing a subtle psychological truth, is one aspect of the primacy given to subjective consciousness in Indian culture. It was not, as European critics once thought, technical inability that prevented the Indian artist from representing the objective world: he chose not to. When he wished, he was perfectly able to depict nature realistically. Vegetation, and above all animals – carved in stone, wood or ivory, or painted in various media – are often depicted with a breathtaking tenderness that captures exactly the essential feeling-tone of the subject. This essence quality is called in Sanskrit *rasa*, and to portray the *rasa* is one of the prime duties of the artist, whether dancer, musician, painter or sculptor. The *Vishnudharmottara* mentions nine *rasas* as the nine basic feeling-tones: the erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, terrible, odious, marvellous, and peaceful. Each *rasa* elicits its appropriate emotional response (*bhava*) in the viewer: respectively love, mirth, sorrow, anger, energy, fear, disgust, astonishment and tranquillity. We have here a theory of aesthetics as moral education that Aristotle would immediately have understood.

In painting, each *rasa* had to be depicted in its appropriate colour. So too did the basic character of the subjects, which, according to the ancient classification of Vedic philosophy, corresponded to one of the three *gunas*, or ways of being that in various combination make up the world: spiritual (*sattva*), energetic (*rajas*) and dull (*tamas*). Put another way, each aspect of creation has, in varying proportions, the qualities of light, motion and mass.

Significantly, the word *rasa* is also used to mean both the sap of a plant and, in yoga, the inner current of bliss which activates all beings, even though it is habitually overlooked by the extroverted attention. Contrapuntally, the word most commonly used to describe the utter dispassion of Enlightenment is *vairagya*, which literally means 'colourless'.

Art as Sacrament

Works of art created by humans are an imitation of divine forms; by utilizing their rhythms, a restructuring of the vibrational rate of the limited human personality is effected. AITAREYA BRAHMANA

According to traditional Indian belief every creature has its own purpose which it fulfils on earth. The purpose of the artist was to reproduce those Divine forms which in turn lead the spectator to union with the Divine. Exalted though his task was, there was no division between artist and craftsman in ancient India. The most usual word for art (*shilpa*) covered a huge range of creative and useful

endeavour spread over all aspects of culture. *Shilpa* was divided into sixty-four branches which, in addition to the visual arts of painting, sculpture and architecture, included accomplishments ranging from dance, music and engineering to cooking, perfumery and making love. Art, in short, was the practice of all those refined skills that enrich our being in the world, bringing nourishment, fullness and delight to life. This delight was not just pleasure, which depends on the senses, but what is called in Sanskrit *ananda*, an inner, spiritual bliss that exists prior to, and independent of, any sensory or mental stimuli. This state of pure, unalloyed Being is the natural fruit of refining senses and mind by leading them away from the field of gross perception, through the subtle realms, to the unbounded level of life, which is our own nature. The attainment of this intrinsic bliss was not only the goal of artistic endeavour but also the highest spiritual experience and as such the affective aspect of Enlightenment. The great nineteenth-century saint Paramahansa Ramakrishna was once asked, 'Where do I find God?' His reply was, 'Look between two thoughts.'

The Sanskrit word *shilpin* cannot be adequately translated as 'artist', 'craftsman' or 'artisan' – though it includes all these meanings. To them would have to be added the concepts of 'priest' and 'magician' in order to convey the *shilpin's* role and skill in facilitating a profound change in consciousness. All these meanings must be remembered here when, as we are forced to by our language, we use the word 'artist'. The role of the artist was to contact archetypal and transpersonal levels of reality, and to depict those levels in objective form. For both the artist and the viewer, contemplation of the divine form becomes a means of transcending the limited ego-personality into which we are habitually contracted and from which our suffering stems. The creative artist is thus an agent of liberation: he mimics the original creative act – the descent of Consciousness into matter – and the forms he creates facilitate the return ascent of matter into Consciousness. His access to the treasury of these alchemical forms is provided by deep meditative experience and a profound, ingrained knowledge of the traditional canon.

Generally speaking, Indian art is anonymous. The artist in traditional cultures, of which the Hindu is a prime example, is not particularly interested in individual innovation; he is not the isolated genius of the Western romantic tradition. He feels at one with the cosmic forces, an integrated part of his universe, not an alienated 'outsider' divorced from it. As an individual, such an artist does not consider himself fundamentally different from, or opposed to, society at large; he is a limb of the body, a cell of the organism, acting as a single entity yet inextricably part of an indivisible and organic whole. As such, he is embedded and nourished in a series of concentric matrices – family, social, cultural, natural, religious and cosmic – that enfold, sustain and strengthen his individual creative life. Stable in this identity, his role is faithfully to transmit those forms which preserve and continue the inherited structures and beliefs of his society; his brief is conservative not innovative, social as opposed to individual, educative rather than diverting. His concern is not to invent new forms, but to rekindle the vitality latent in the ancient ones. As the mediator of the sacred in daily life, his work is utilitarian rather than entertaining, and this is one reason why there is no division between craftsman and artist in traditional societies. The anonymity of the artist here is not the impersonal sterility of Modernism, but a transpersonal perspective and status. Personal idiosyncrasy was indeed