

Allyson Montana

2008 Fulbright-Hays in India

(India and Sri Lanka group)

The Visual Vocabulary of India

A Unit on Hindu symbolism in Indian art

Overview of Unit:

As western educators we often struggle to teach the fundamental concepts of Hinduism in a way that our students understand. The Hindu religion could appear to be antithetical to the Judeo-Christian tradition, with its defining characteristic being that it is polytheistic. Whether tumultuous or harmonious, the relationship between Hindus and Muslims has defined daily life in India for hundreds of years. Similarly, despite Siddhartha's birth in India, Buddhism seems to have been ritualistically "swallowed" by the Pantheon of Hindu Gods and Goddesses.

The goal of this unit is to define Hinduism via visual symbols where they appear in sculpture, painting, and more impermanent ritualistic art. Although the unit will focus on visual art, I will include literary symbols and the images in daily life in India. I learned early that Indian art forms are connected to one another via a visual vocabulary that is both secular and religious. Thousands of years of history have blurred the lines that demarcate India's many art forms. Whether sculpture defines dance or dance defines sculpture is irrelevant. However, in the minds of every Hindu is the idea that Shiva dances, and whether you evoke the image of Shiva via art of dance or sculpture seems to matter less.

Student Population:

I have created this unit for use in multiple classes, across disciplines. Although I will make it available to all my colleagues, I see the best application in the following subjects:

Ancient and Medieval History- This 9th grade course is required. It covers ancient history to the Protestant Reformation.

Rise of the Modern World- This 10th grade course is also required. The basics of Hinduism have already been established in Ancient and Medieval History, allowing the teacher to teach modern India and therefore, modern Hindu practices.

Survey of Art History- This semester-long elective enrolls juniors and seniors. This unit will fit into the non-western portion of this course.

AP Art History- Because Indian art can appear on the advanced placement exam, the faculty member teaching this course will be able to use this unit to supplement the existing works of Indian art already covered in the course.

World Literature- An elective designed for upperclassmen, this course draws on a variety of literary traditions from non-western cultures.

General Outline of Unit:

Each lesson will begin with a brief introduction for teacher use. Whenever applicable, I will provide the teacher with resources such as websites or articles related to the lesson. In addition to lesson plans, I will provide handouts for distribution in class. Although these lessons are prepared for the high school level, they can be modified slightly for use in a middle school setting.

Section One: Hindu Temples (3 classes)

Begin by showing students a PowerPoint slide show of famous Hindu temples. Ask them the following discussion questions:

1. What is most striking about this structure?
2. How does this differ from western style buildings?
3. What would lead you to view this structure as religious?
4. What symbols can you identify? How do these symbols relate to what you know about Hinduism?

See power point for additional images, prompts, and lecture bullets

Teacher notes:

Hindu temples can date as far back as 1,000 BCE, making them among the oldest religious structures on earth. Although Hindu temples vary in size and style, they tend to have several basic components in common.

Inside:

- Sanctum, womb chamber, or *Garba Griha*, where the image of a deity is housed
- A circumambulatory
- A congregation hall

Outside:

- *Sikhara* or in S. India, the *Vimanum* : A peak shaped tower
These can appear in two designs *Dravida* style, a style marked by pyramid like steps, or *Naruga* style, or bee-hive shaped

It is important to stress the range and therefore variety in Hindu temple design. Kerala temples, for example differ greatly from those of the Deccan Plateau. The PowerPoint presentation illustrates a variety of styles from various regions in India.

The mandala is a sacred symbol in Hinduism, as it is in many religions. The simple design of a square and circle represent the earthy domain (square) intersecting with the heavenly

domain (circle). In this way, we can view a Dravidian temple as the intersection between both heaven and earth.

Temple statuary, design, and ornamentation are juxtaposed with a relatively small, dark, cave-like sanctum usually containing a lingam and/or image of a deity. The lingam is perhaps one of the most discussed objects of Hindu worship often confused as "Indian sex worship." The lingam is a symbol of the God Shiva, but also of divine creation. It is often seen accompanied by a yoni, or oval symbolizing birth and creation.

Directions for lesson: Ask students to write down descriptions of various religious structures they are familiar with. What do they all have in common? What makes these different from one another? What aspects of religious structures seem to prepare the visitor for a more spiritual realm? What acts or rituals signify exit of the earthly realm?

Discussion points:

1. Puja: Offering to Gods and Goddesses- most often a temple flower, liquid, fruit, or other small foods
2. Touching the ground- a way of leaving the earthly realm and entering a temple. Often viewed as a sign of respect or thankfulness
3. Quiet: Although one may hear chanting or praying, generally the temple is a place of quiet worship
4. Hands clasped: A sign of respect and prayer not just for deities, but as a greeting in most of India
5. Kneeling: Like many religions, Hinduism invokes a level of humility and prostration in a place of worship. Many visitors will kneel or bow their heads in a temple. Similarly, visitors will avoid turning their back or the bottoms of their feet towards the image of the deity.

(Handout A)

Hindu Temples

Discussion points:

1. Please write down religious structures with which you are familiar.

2. What do all of these structures have in common?

3. What sets them apart from one another?

4. How do Hindu temples compare to typically western structures?

In groups of 2-3 students, please analyze the following temple (I will provide you with images).

- a. Can you guess where this temple comes from in India? What made you choose this region?

- b. Describe the general shape or design of the structure.

- c. What symbols are used in the decoration on this temple?

- d. Is this temple a successful work of architecture? Why or why not?

Teacher notes:

It is important to establish that by asking students if a work of art is successful, one is not asking for their opinion of the work of art. In other words, whether they "like" the piece or not is irrelevant. If it is successful, then it has achieved its goal. Often in architecture this means that the design, decoration, orientation, and medium are harmonious and consistent with the structure's use (purpose).

Since many of the students are not familiar with Hindu symbolism, you might choose this time to give them the **Basics of Hindu Symbols** cheat sheet provided on the next page. Pay particular attention to the swastika, which may be confused for the Nazi party emblem.

(Handout B)

Hindu Symbols 101

1. **Swastika:** An ancient symbol of "auspiciousness" often carved or painted on the outside of Hindu temples. The symbol may represent stability derived from the power of Brahma. In addition, it is believed to ward off evil spirits.
2. **Yoni:** A circle or oval shape carved from wood or stone symbolizing creation, specifically the female form. Often seen coupled with a lingam in an inner sanctum of a temple.
3. **Lingam:** A divine symbol of creation usually located in an inner sanctum of a temple.
4. **Om (or aum):** The mystical symbol of the entire universe and a mantra believed to be spoken at creation of the world (the earth was born from sound).



5. **Trisula:** This trident is carried by both Shiva and Durga. The three prongs symbolize Shiva's roles as creator, preserver, and destroyer. Additionally, these prongs stand for three major shaktis, or energies- will, action, and wisdom.
6. **Yantra:** This two or three dimensional geometric design usually features interlocking shapes consisting of squares, rectangles, and triangles meant to evoke the cosmic universe and inspire mystical meditation.
7. **Mandala:** Common in many religions, this symbol in its most basic form is a square combined with a circle symbolizing the intersection between the earthly world and the spiritual.
8. **Lotus:** This flower symbolizes non-attachment and beauty in both Hinduism and Buddhism. The lotus grows from the mud but floats atop clean water. Therefore, the symbolism of "non-attachment" is apparent.
9. **Conch shell:** Used in various Hindu temple rituals and frequently seen held by lord Krishna in Hindu art.

Other symbols: Most Hindu Gods and Goddesses hold various objects or are associated with certain symbols. Some examples include a mace, peacock, cow, and chakra (spinning weapon).

Discussion points: What symbols represent common religions in the west? How do they differ from the symbols representing Hinduism?

Section Two: Hindu Gods and Goddesses (3-4 classes)

Again, begin the lesson by showing students a variety of images of Gods and Goddesses in the Hindu religion. Ask them the following discussion questions:

1. What do you notice about these figures?
2. Would you guess that these images are secular or religious? Why?
3. What symbols appear in these images? How are they used? Can you derive any meaning from these symbols?
4. What aspects of these figures are human? What aspects appear supernatural?
5. What similarities exist between the images? What differences?

Ask students to brainstorm images of Gods and Goddesses and bring up the image of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

- a. God is seen as a "father," dressed in robes, looking down from heaven (often divine figures appear to gaze down on the viewer)
- b. The image of Allah and Muhammad are not seen in Muslim art. Why?
- c. How is the Buddha depicted?
- d. What symbols are used to depict God or Yahweh in Judaism?

How do images of Gods and Goddesses change with geography? In other words, how do certain regions choose to depict Gods?

Examples:

The Buddha in India vs. the Buddha image in China, Korea, and Japan

The Virgin Mary in S. America, Europe, and Scandinavia

Jesus in S. America, Africa, Korea, and northern Europe

Show students the PowerPoint slideshow entitled "Hindu Pantheon- the Basics." Explain that with thousands of Gods and Goddesses (and avatars and incarnations) it would be impossible to do justice to the Hindu pantheon in a few short classes.

Teacher Notes:

No discussion of Hindu Gods would be complete without an thorough explanation of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Westerners and in fact, many Indians seem to gravitate towards the story of Rama and Sita in the Mahabharata. Their story is a wonderful section to examine when discussing gender roles in ancient India, define Hanuman, and present a connection to "Lanka," or Sri Lanka, as it is known today. A helpful visual is the popular television series or modern day works of art depicting the relationship between Rama and Sita. There is a plethora of videos, cartoons, and images on YouTube.

It will be important to discuss the visual symbolism associated with Rama, Sita, and Hanuman. For instance, what visual vocabulary does a modern Hindu person recognize in images of Sita and Rama that we need to learn? What are these character's non-visual attributes? Why do these attributes make their characters universally appealing?

Face book Assignment:

Assign each student a god or goddess from the below list:

- Ganga
- Lakshmi
- Durga
- Kurma
- Vamana
- Matangi
- Kali
- Shakti
- Kartikay
- Dhanwantari
- Saraswati
- Hanuman
- Balrama
- Bhuvaneshwari
- Rama
- Maya
- Annapurna
- Ganesha
- Galruda
- Saraswathi
- Muruga
- Anjaneya
- Shani Dev

Remind students that some of the Gods and Goddesses listed above are consorts of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, or are avatars.

Although divine, Hindu Gods exhibit a variety of human characteristics such as anger, passion, and greed. After reading about various Gods in Hindu epics, one can imagine these Gods and goddesses as characters in a drama. Certainly teenagers can relate to this! Use the below assignment sheet for students to research one God and predict their behavior on face book. Remember to present this activity in such a way as to treat these Gods and Goddesses respectfully. A summary of the Ramayana or passages from the text should be given to students as homework the night before.



(Handout C)

profile

edit

inbox friends

Log out



5 notifications

Groups:

View photos of Ganesha

Send Ganesha a message

Requests

Invitations

Applications

What are you doing right now?

Basic Information:

Full name:

Sex:

Networks:

Hometown:

Parents:

Relationship status:

Looking for:

Birthday:

Education:

Hobbies:

Political affiliation:

Religious affiliation:

Goals:

Accomplishments:

Color associated with this God:

Attributes:

Avatars:

Consorts:

Symbols:

Write on Ganesha's Wall:

Links:

Advertize:

Ganesha's Virtual Bookshelf:

View inbox:

Messages :

1. From:
Message:

2. From:
Message:

Ganesha's Photo Albums:

Incarnations, etc.

Section Three: Hindu sculpture

Teacher Notes:

Any study of Hindu temple statuary or sculpture must allow ample time for an overview of diverse styles and subject matter throughout the subcontinent. The following is a list of similarities often found in Indian sculpture:

Style:

Even during the Indus Valley period of Indian art history, sculpture was portrayed in a sensual, non-static, even voluptuous style. The bodies of Gods and mortals are depicted with a sensual style not seen in Greek and Roman statuary. Similarly, much East Asian art appears far more static and restrained compared to Indian counterparts. Indian sculpture is not symmetrical, often reaching out into space, and begging the viewer to confront it. Even temple statues, which one might assume would show constraint, appear to dance and sway in the porticoes and niches of stone architecture. Guardian statues do less to inspire fear but seem to tease the viewer into attempting an entrance.

The subtle smile seen on the countenances of both Buddhist and Hindu art seems to imply a self satisfaction and inviting nature to the relationship between viewer and figural art. The significance of this smile and the sensual form is connected to the Hindu belief that sexuality is a union of the earthly realm with the spiritual. The smile often appears on enlightened beings, knowing beings, and those that have reached a satisfied state with nature and their earthly self.

Abstraction / realism:

Students will notice that the figures are both abstracted and in some cases, quite realistic. The facial features may appear overly symmetrical and flat, but the delicate treatment of hair, ornament, and fabric are a clue that the artist is capable of carving in a realistic manner. Depiction of objects held in the hands of Gods and Goddesses are often deliberately realistic in order for the viewer to identify the God.

Dance:

The figure in Indian art is often in a state of movement. Often, these figures are illustrated dancing. Hand gestures, leg movement, hip and head tilts, and even the gaze of eyes will alert the viewer to the "mood" of the scene and very often depict a specific story within the epics. The direct contraposition of the torso is meant to emphasize the angle of the body and the unique geometric form created by this angle of the hips, torso, head, and arms. A wonderful and frequently seen example to show students is "Shiva Nataraja," or Lord of the Dance. In this sculpture Shiva is seen doing a cosmic dance inside a aureole of fire. In one hand he holds a lotus, in the other a ball of fire, signifying both life and death in the cosmic cycle of the universe. Shiva dances upon an apasmara, or dwarf, meant to signify ignorance.

Show a variety of images of Hindu sculpture to students. The more images they see, the more desensitized they will become to the "sexual" nature of the figures. Instead, have them focus on the objects the figures carry and list them. Ask them the following questions during the slide show:

1. Where do you think these images were originally located?
2. What feelings or messages would they give the viewer if he/she was entering a Hindu temple? A government building? A private home? A palace?
3. What is the level of relief? How does this high relief make the viewer feel?
4. What size do you think these sculptures are? Were they placed at eye level or above the viewer?
5. How do these sculptures differ from sacred images of deities kept inside inner sanctums in temples?
6. How are these figures human?
7. How are these figures supernatural?
8. Why would Indian artists continually choose to use the convention of multiple limbs or heads?
9. How is decoration and pattern used in these images?
10. What is two dimensional about these figures?
11. What elements are abstracted?
12. What aspects of these figures are treated realistically by the artist(s)?
13. Which of these sculptures is most successful? Why? Which is least successful?

Ask students to form groups and be prepared to compare and contrast Hindu sculpture with sculpture from other regions.

Show images of Hindu statuary in comparison to:

1. African Benin bronze figures
2. Greek/Roman marble figures
3. Stone Egyptian images
4. Early Chinese stone sculptures of the Buddha

It is often helpful for an art history student to "mark up" an image for better understanding. Students are generally not encouraged to "take notes" directly onto an image, so place an overhead projector sheet on top of a photograph or copy of Hindu sculpture. Have them draw lines using a dry erase marker on the image and point out various aspects of the work of art that are common to Hindu sculpture.

Focus should be on the following:

Abstraction
Posture of the figure
Dance (hand and body language)
Realistic aspects of the figure
Decoration
Three dimensionality and the sensual line
Relief
Medium
Objects held by the figure
Gaze
Interaction with other figures or the viewer
Possible purpose of the figure
Identification as a *God* or *Goddess*

(Handout D)

Sacred Sculpture: Comparing sculptural styles globally

Directions: You will be given five images of Hindu statuary to compare to African , Greco-Roman, Egyptian, and Chinese statues. Please take notes in the spaces below. Rate their level of difference between 1 and 10. 1 denotes similarity and 10 denotes difference.

1.

Indian Image A: _____

Non-Indian Image A: _____

Describe the subject matter in each:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Medium:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Design and composition:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Level of similarity/difference (mark on scale):

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10

2.

Indian Image B: _____

Non-Indian Image B: _____

Describe the subject matter in each:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Medium:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Design and composition:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Level of similarity/difference (mark on scale):

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10

3.

Indian Image C: _____

Non-Indian Image C: _____

Describe the subject matter in each:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Medium:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Design and composition:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Level of similarity/difference (mark on scale):

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10

4.

Indian Image D: _____

Non-Indian Image D: _____

Describe the subject matter in each:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Medium:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Design and composition:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Level of similarity/difference (mark on scale):

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10

5.

Indian Image E: _____

Non-Indian Image E: _____

Describe the subject matter in each:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Medium:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Design and composition:

Indian:

Non-Indian:

Level of similarity/difference (mark on scale):

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10

Final Assessment:

Ask students to analyze an Indian work of art with careful attention to the following:

1. Symbols- Explain why these symbols are illustrated in this work of art and relate them to a broader understanding of Hinduism.
2. Deities-How is the God or Goddess portrayed?
3. Composition/style- What makes this uniquely Indian?
4. How is the viewer meant to interact with this work of art?
5. How is this work of art "used" today? In other words, where is it currently located? How do viewers relate to it now?
6. How does the medium relate to the purpose or style of this piece?
7. How does size and/or relief relate to its purpose?
8. How is this work of art similar or dissimilar to sculpture or temples in other parts of India? Other parts of the world?

Length: 6-8 pages, double spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font.

Use MLA style bibliography as outlined in your *Writer's Reference Guide*.

Bhaskarananda, Swami. *The Essentials of Hinduism*. Seattle: Viveka Press, 2002.

Craig, Albert M., ed., et al. *The Heritage of World Civilizations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007.

Dallapiccola, A.L. *Indian Art in Detail*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Harle, J.C. *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 2nd ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994.

Hausman, Suzanne. *India in Color*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958.

Jansen, Eva Rudy. *The Book of Hindu Imagery: The God and Their Symbols*. Newburyport, MA: Weiser Books, 1993.

Lee, Sherman E. *A History of Far Eastern Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, inc., 1962.

Mathur, Asharani, ed. *India*. Bangkok: Media Transasia Limited, 1985.

Pande, Alka. *Masterpieces of Indian Art*. Delhi: Roli Books, 2004.

Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005.

Web resources:

- 1. University of Texas, Austin: Resources on India**
<http://asnic.utexas.edu/asnic/countries/india/>
- 2. Site devoted to Indian sculpture and its relation to dance.**
<http://www.kanakasabha.com/sculptur/index.html>
- 3. Metropolitan Museum of Art: Various pages on Indian art and images.**
http://www.metmuseum.org/TOAH/HD/hind/hd_hind.htm
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/sasa/hd_sasa.htm
<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hi/access.htm>
- 4. Seattle Museum of Art: Interactive web site/lesson on Krishna**
<http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/exhibit/interactives/intimateworlds/enter.asp>
- 5. National Museum, Delhi:**
<http://www.nationalmuseumindia.gov.in/>

6. University of Calcutta Museum site:

http://www.caluniv.ac.in/museum/museum_frame.htm