

Beyond Bollywood

2000 Years of Dance in Art

Large Print Labels

Beyond Bollywood: 2000 Years of Dance in Art

Dance occupies a vital role in the religious and cultural practices of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Himalayan Region. Its force and meaning often convey profound messages beyond recognizable postures and categories of dance styles. Representations of dance have been created by artists over many centuries. Historically in great sculptures and paintings, and in recent decades, also in film and new media.

Within spiritual paths, the dance of, or for, the gods can provide religious and ethical lessons and can also symbolize power and majesty. Some Hindu and Buddhist deities dance, expressing their energies through rhythmic movements. Likewise, sacred dance by saints, minor deities, or devotees can conjure unseen realms, potentially disrupting or invigorating the world. In daily life, people have long danced for worship, for festivals, for the entertainment of emperors and princes, and for their own enjoyment. Rulers are depicted being honored or entertained by dancers or piously watching danced reenactments of sacred stories.

Through the representation of dance in artworks that date from the first to the twenty-first century, museum visitors are invited to consider the compelling visual language of dance through its many permutations and complexities. Beyond *Bollywood: 2000 Years of Dance in Art* demonstrates the exceptional power of dance in religious thought, literature, politics, and societal structures. And it explores how dance conveys joy and exuberance through patterned or free movement. Dance was—and is—not only for delight.

Sarah Choo Jing (Singaporean, b. 1990)

Art of the Rehearsal, Portrait Series

2016

three simultaneous videos on monitors, 2 mins 53 secs
Courtesy of Nijkerk-Bogen Collection

Filming through a one-way mirror, Sarah Choo Jing captured the ritualistic yet routine preparation of multiple individual dancers from Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities, and presents them on three screens that play concurrently. These animated portraits capture the mental and physical journeys of dancers as they dress, preen, and prepare for performance.

Sarah Choo Jing's video work often delves into the personal narratives of her subjects by creating seductive and intimate forays into otherwise unremarkable moments. As part of the larger *Art of the Rehearsal* body of work (another element from this series appears at the end of this exhibition), *Portrait Series* presents solitary figures that draw viewers into their emotional and physical spaces, creating a sense of connection through their isolation.

The Exhibition Experience

In this exhibition, you will encounter 121 artworks made of many materials and mediums, originating from ten countries, and created over 2000 years. Arranged by theme, each section offers varying answers to the questions: What is dance accomplishing here? How does dance communicate aspects of one's identity, status, and beliefs? And what are the complicated motives associated with dance, on behalf of the creators, performers, and patrons?

Destruction & Creation explores how dance can bring about cosmic or global change.

Devotion connects earthly and divine realms through the dance of both god and devotee.

Subjugation reveals how dance has a transformative power and can overcome negative forces.

Glorification complicates the idea of reverence by exploring dance that honors gods and kings.

Celebration demonstrates how dance often expresses exuberance, charm, and joy.

Within each thematic section, you will encounter one highlighted object with a longer, descriptive text representative of the theme overall. Near some artworks, you will find QR codes (accessible on your smart device) or screens featuring short video clips that suggest the movement and meanings embodied by the artworks. You will also find four contemporary video artworks by artists from India and Singapore. These expand on the five themes and continue our narrative into the present.

Be sure to visit the Rosenthal Education Center's interactive exhibition, *Art in Motion*, for art-making experiences, and check cincyart.org/dance for associated programs and dance performances.

Destruction & Creation

The extraordinary power of dance to affect the cosmos, the universe and earthly order has often been envisioned in Hindu and Buddhist contexts. Through the vigorous dance of Shiva—the Hindu god associated with creating, sustaining, and destroying the universe—dance is transformative. In his form of Nataraja (King or Lord of Dance), Shiva dances the world into and out of existence through endless rhythmic cycles. Today, the depiction of Shiva Nataraja has become symbolic of Hindu civilizations, where strength and perseverance can be witnessed through the force of the god's form—a form echoed through rhythm and endless motion.

In Hindu and Buddhist realms, the universe's life moves in cycles, with cosmic destruction and creation recurring eternally. Beyond Shiva Nataraja, other deities also embody creative and destructive tendencies. The Buddhist goddess Vajravarahi empowers creative and destructive forces through meditative practices while adorned with the severed heads of enemies. Shmashana Adhipati, an otherworldly pair of skeletal deities, are the "glorious lords of the cremation grounds" who transform fear through dance. And the

god Bhairava, who also wanders the cremation grounds, dances through the darkness with his dog companion. Each of these deities harnesses power through awe, energy, and stasis to demonstrate that anything concrete can be dissolved. They embody wisdom that transcends human limitations and continually transform the universe through dance.

Shiva Nataraja, the Lord of Dance

circa 1125–1175

India; Tamil Nadu, Thanjavur district

copper alloy

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Adolph D.
and Wilkins C. Williams Fund

69.46

Shiva dancing in the form of Nataraja, “Lord or King of Dance,” represents harmony between two extremes. He embodies rhythmic movement while standing perfectly still. He holds within himself the possibility of dancing the world to extinction, only to recreate it anew. Through Shiva Nataraja’s cosmic dance of balance and restraint, the universe exists.

Dating to the Chola dynasty (circa 850–1280), the high point of bronze casting, this image represents Shiva’s vigorous “dance of bliss,” the *ananda-tandava*. Within the sacred stories, Shiva dances in a number of different ways, but this form is the most iconic. Among the key features to identify the form includes the left leg lifted high and angled across the body, four arms, and the figure underfoot, usually associated with ignorance, that

Shiva dances upon to subdue. While the Nataraja form is often reproduced, the symbolic meaning of the god must be considered (and re-considered) for various periods and audiences.



Scan the code to view a video clip that interprets the movements and meanings suggested by this artwork.

Shiva as Nataraja Enshrined with Deities in the Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram

circa 1825–1875

India; Tamil Nadu, Thanjavur district

pigments, gold leaf, and limestone paste on cloth stretched over wood

Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Jane and James
Emison Endowment for South Asian Art

2014.57

Shiva dances eternally in the cosmos, but he also is said to have danced on Earth, at Chidambaram in southeastern India. There stands a temple that is a center of worship of Shiva Nataraja and a significant pilgrimage site. In its inner sanctum—where, in most temples to Shiva, a linga or symbolic emblem representing the god would be the focus of devotion and ritual—there is instead a bronze Nataraja. The sculpture must not be photographed, so our best idea of what it looks like comes from paintings. The primary sanctuary of the Chidambaram temple, with its unusual gold-covered roof and nine pot-like ornaments along the ridge, is shown here. The

icon of Shiva, surrounded by a ring of fire, looms large in the small space. Flanking the dancing Shiva are, on his left, Shivakami, as his consort is known at Chidambaram, and on his right, his son, the elephant-headed Ganesha, also dancing.

"God of All Things," cover, *Newsweek*, November 22, 2010

Magazine

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,
Library Special Collections

When published, this cover of *Newsweek* caused consternation among Indian American communities as well as communities in India. Obama-as-Nataraja does not destroy one universe to reinvent anew. Instead, judging from the attributes that he holds, he had to juggle conflicts, economic crises, health care issues, and more. His presidency required a delicate balance between action and ideas.

The conflation of the president of the United States with Shiva Nataraja demonstrates the ubiquitous nature of the form, and the Western media's comfort in adopting religious symbols and deities for their popular use. By so doing, the form of Nataraja is stripped of its cultural context and religious meaning. Yet aspects of Nataraja are still apparent: Obama-as-Nataraja embodies a superhuman power and a dynamic energy harnessed through the transformative potential of dance.

Ted Shawn in *The Cosmic Dance of Shiva*, cover, *The Dance* 10, no. 5 (September 1928)

Magazine

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,
Library Special Collections

Ted Shawn was one of the most influential dancers in the first half of the twentieth century traveling throughout the United States, Cuba, Europe, and Asia to present original choreography. After a visit to India with his wife, Ruth St. Denis, in 1925–26 to research dance and to perform, Shawn and St. Denis further infused their practice with spiritual ideals. In 1926 they choreographed *The Cosmic Dance of Shiva*, with Shawn in the central role. Slowly moving his body into position, with left leg raised, he twirled as if to signify his being was the center of universal energy. Shawn based his dance on sculptural and painted depictions of the god.

Shawn posed as Shiva Nataraja for the cover of *The Dance*, a popular periodical. The cover is based on a painting by the accomplished illustrator Jean Oldham, which was itself based on a photograph of Shawn posing mid-performance.

The Buddhist Deity Vajravarahi

circa 1300–1400

Tibet

bronze with gilding and inlaid turquoise

Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund
1982.50

With minimalist grace, Vajravarahi—a manifestation of full enlightenment in female form—dances balanced on the toes of one foot. Apart from her slightly furrowed brow and parted lips, we might miss that Vajravarahi's expression verges on fierce. Indeed, Tibetan tradition understands her as an aspect of the supremely peaceful Perfection of Wisdom; a goddess extolled as Mother of All Buddhas.

Her implements, though, suggest her grim side. In one hand she holds the top of a skull. Inside, waves of negativity roil back and forth, awaiting the blow of her upraised right hand, which bears a curved flaying knife. Together the knife and the skull symbolize emptiness and compassion, whose union leads to enlightenment. This figure, in other words, is neither angry at anyone nor a slayer of beings. Instead, she directs her anger toward the emotional poisons that obscure pure awareness.

The Buddhist Deity Vajravarahi

circa 1400–1500

Tibet; probably Densatil Monastery

copper alloy with gilding, gemstones,
and traces of paint

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased by
the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Board of
Trustees in honor of Dr. Pratapaditya Pal, Senior
Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art
1970–95, AC1996.4.1

Scarves waft in graceful curves around Vajravarahi,
suggesting the movement of her dance, while
at the same time, a string of human skulls hangs
weightily from her shoulders. These, and the skulls
in her crown, recall that she dwells in cremation
grounds and indicate the fierceness she deploys
for our benefit.

Each skull in her crown represents one of the five
psychological poisons that we can transform into
perceptive awareness if we meditate on Vajravarahi:
anger, attachment, pride, jealousy, and delusion.
Like the other images of this goddess nearby, here
she brandishes a flaying knife with which she will

destroy the obstacles to our spiritual progress
contained in the skull bowl she holds.

The Buddhist Deity Vajravarahi

circa 1700–1800

eastern Tibet; Kham province

pigments on cotton

Rubin Museum of Art,

Gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin

C2006.66.396 (HAR 839)

In Tibet there are many female Buddhas, including Vajravarahi, the Lightning Sow. She is recognizable by the pig's head jutting up from her flaming hair. Pigs are thought to consume all negativities without harm, just as devotees can remove their own mental negativities through meditation.

Here, Vajravarahi spins atop a golden sun disk and a pink lotus flower, between which is a corpse that represents the ego, which must be subdued. Her dance generates a ring of orange wisdom flames, lofting her hair upward and floating her long green scarf on waves of heat. Yet the dance generates more than destructive heat, for just inside the lurid flames lies a region of cool indigo punctuated at successive intervals by finely drawn curved and straight lines. Symbolically, they represent the wisdom

and compassion that emanate from Vajravarahi's heart, however fierce her imagery might seem.

Dancing Shiva

circa 800–900

west central India

sandstone

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Frederick L. Jack
Fund 69.1047

Here, the pinwheeling of the eight arms of this form of Shiva gives an animated sense of movement that we can imagine a human dancer emulating. In the evocative words of scholar Stella Kramrisch, “The inner calm of Śiva’s three-eyed face shows the god as the still center of the turbulence of his arms.” This sculptural form of Shiva was most likely part of an overdoor panel, with Shiva joining the goddesses known as the “Seven Mothers.” Images of Shiva, and those of other deities, were created for worship and not just for aesthetic affect, though their beauty has undoubtedly moved viewers through the centuries as it does today.

Dancing Shiva

circa 800

India; Madhya Pradesh

sandstone

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, from the Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection

M.82.42.4

In stone sculpture, Shiva was represented dancing well before the development of the classic Chola-dynasty bronze Nataraja seen nearby. While his dance may be shown in a variety of vigorous ways, Shiva does not lift his left leg to cross in front of his body in these earlier representations. Here also we find a feature not found on Chola Natarajas: Shiva's penis is erect, recalling the god's link with male reproductive power and his frequent symbol, the *linga*. A *linga* is a usually abstract cylindrical emblem that has a range of associations, from a sign of the unrepresentable Absolute to a cosmic pillar to a phallus.

Look for this *Panchamukhalinga*, or five-faced representation of the god Shiva in this form, on display in gallery 143.



Five-faced Representation of the God Shiva (Panchamukhalinga), circa 750–850, India, Madhya Pradesh or Rajasthan, stone, Bequest of Mary M. Emery, by exchange, 1982.123

Overdoor Panel with Dancing Shiva

circa 1750

Nepal

wood

Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Lenart
M.76.48.3

Large panels such as this hang, leaning forward, over doors and windows of Nepalese temples. They are called toranas, or gateways, and function symbolically to mark the transition from the outside world into the sacred space of the temple.

Many different deities may take center stage on toranas; they are said to judge whether those seeking entrance are worthy. Here, the central figure is an eight-armed dancing Shiva whose glaring eyes, knitted brow, and garland of severed heads suggest that Shiva dances in a fierce and protective mood. The god is flanked by unidentified figures that dance and play drums. The smaller of these, with animal heads, may be *ganas*, legendary

grotesque followers of Shiva. The other elements of the panel—crocodile-like creatures, snakes, and snake deities—are common to Nepalese over-door panels.

Strut with Dancing Bhairava

circa 1700

Nepal; Kathmandu Valley

wood with traces of pigments

Walters Art Museum, Gift of John
and Berthe Ford, 2021

F.167

With hair flaring upward, eyes bulging, and mouth grinning frighteningly, Bhairava (a form of Shiva) dances on the back of a dog. The deity's terrifying nature is emphasized by the garland of skulls adorning him and his association with the animal, as dogs were seen as scavengers in cremation grounds. But just as dogs can be fierce protectors, in Nepal, Bhairava could also be a powerful guardian, repelling or overcoming threatening negative forces. This protective function may have been foremost in the creation of this image as it was not an icon in a shrine but rather part of an architectural strut supporting the eaves of a temple roof. In Nepal, Bhairava, like many other deities, is important in various religious contexts, both Hindu and Buddhist.

The Lords of the Cremation Ground Dancing

circa 1400–1500

Tibet

pigments and gold on cotton

Rubin Museum of Art, Gift of the Shelley
& Donald Rubin Foundation

F1996.16.5 (HAR 462)

Here, the “Lords of the Cremation Ground” dance. The hypnotic look in their six eyes counters the seemingly friendliness of their grins. Each figure holds a red staff crowned by skulls in their right hand and a skull cup filled with blood or ambrosia in their left. From the enlightened perspective of the Lords, who see all things as empty, blissful, and luminous, even the apparently toxic forces of the cremation ground become potent fuel for enlightenment.

Cremation grounds might not seem ideal places either for dancing or for meditation. Religious texts and artworks indicate, though, that both activities occurred in cremation grounds. They were isolated from the everyday world, and being in

them forced religious seekers to confront horror, disgust, death, and the impermanence of everything. Even when they were not used in real life, cremation grounds could be conjured in visualization.

The Lords of the Cremation Ground Dancing

circa 1800–1900

Tibet

pigments on cotton

Rubin Museum of Art,

Gift of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation

F1997.40.9 (HAR 590)

What are the “Lords of the Cremation Ground” standing on as they dance? One’s foot rests on a conch shell and the other’s on a cowrie—both symbols of emptiness because they are hollow. Below them is a white step pyramid of piled bones.

Although the entire scene appears gruesome, the flames of pure awareness radiate from the pair. These two, therefore, must be regarded as expressions of the full enlightenment that generates such flames. Because such imagery can be disturbing, it is essential that a qualified spiritual teacher guide religious adherents. Therefore, paintings depicting such imagery may also show such spiritual guides, or lamas. Here, the lama

Tsongkhapa, the founding figure of the Gelug lineage of Himalayan Buddhism, is seated cross-legged on a lotus at the top of the painting.

The Deity Rahula and Other Figures, from a Manuscript of Buddhist Iconography

1700–1800

Nepal

ink and opaque watercolors on paper and wood

Los Angeles Museum of Art,

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert S. Coles

M.81.206.5.1

Three fantastical figures—each incorporating Buddhist and Hindu symbols—dance on animals or humans. The face on the central figure's belly is characteristic of Rahula, the ancient Indian deity of eclipses. But Rahula does not usually have myriad heads or limbs, or tread on writhing animals and men. So, these characteristics suggest that this is a special Rahula whose spiritual parent is the fierce Buddhist meditation deity Vajrabhairava. On the left of Rahula is the elephant-headed Ganesha with his animal mount, a mouse or rat. Ganesha, who is known to overcome obstacles, dances in both Hindu and Buddhist contexts in Nepal and elsewhere. On the right, an as yet unidentified four-armed deity

dances atop a human corpse. This manuscript may have been an artist manual to guide depictions of the deities of the Nepalese religion or, with its imaginative combination of symbols, it may be the innovative drawings of an individual artist.

Sh. Baatar (Mongolian)

**Masked Ritual Dance at Erdene Zuu
Monastery**

circa 1961

colors on canvas

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Museum purchase
1992.342

A vast Mongolian monastery fills our field of vision as the sacred dance called *cham* unfolds before us. At the center of seven concentric circles drawn on the ground lies the focus of the rite: a cone of barley dough called a *zor*. Ritualists dance around it, their masks so large that they must look out from the characters' mouths to ensure that their intricate movements remain synchronized.

Sacred figures have already danced to transform the circular space into a symbolic cremation ground where negativities will die. Other masked dancers drive evil into the *zor*, and a deer-headed figure will eventually shred it, symbolically destroying the evil and preparing the way for the prosperity generated by wealth deities.

The climax of the rite is when the buffalo-headed god of death, Yama, begins dancing. His manifestation expresses the insight that death is both inevitable and necessary for renewal.

Devotion

Devotional dance represents the reunification of opposites, the transcending of dualities, and the achievement of ultimate oneness. These states of achievement resonate with many forms of Buddhist, Hindu, and sometimes Muslim thought. Such religious adoration is often expressed through rhythmic motion and organized postures that create a connection between earthly and divine realms.

The mutual love and longing of god and devotee, or *bhakti*—a relationship so intimate and emotional that it is akin to conjugal love—is often explored through dance. In recent centuries, the religious and spiritual importance of *bhakti* has increased; it has become a central aspect of worship practices and directs how people live their lives. The most frequent depiction of dance and *bhakti* devotion comes from a Hindu context, one that imparts the significant role of music, dance, and drama in the widespread circulation of religious beliefs. This is the circle dance of Krishna and a group of cowherder women who dance together in divine bliss. Krishna, an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, lives in a village and is indistinguishable from the other young male cowherders except for

his strength, cleverness, and beauty. One night he goes deep into the forest and plays his flute; his music is irresistible to the cowherder women, who abandon their families and rush to join him. They dance a dance of connection that entralls the senses and transcends earthly bonds.

Krishna Dances with the Cowherd Women

circa 1850–1900

India; Rajasthan, Nathadwara

opaque watercolors, gold, and silver on cotton

Alice Bimel Endowment for Asian Art

2018.115

As described in the Bhagavata Purana, a religious literary text recounting the stories of the Hindu god Vishnu, the god Krishna, a manifestation of Vishnu, joins in amorous play with the women of a cowherd village, who have left their families to join him in a moonlit forest. The women grow overconfident, and, to teach them a gentle lesson, Krishna vanishes. Before long, though, again using the divine power of illusion, he reappears in their midst and multiplies himself so that each cowherd woman can be close to him. Their dance, the *rasamandala*, often depicting multiple visions of Krishna, is one of longing and connection, and it resonates in earthly and divine realms. He joins the circle dance of the cowherd women and appears again dancing in the center with a single woman. Surrounding the *rasamandala* are little scenes of other episodes in Krishna's life, and along the lower edge of the image is a wall with steps to a lotus-filled stream.

Krishna Dances with the Cowherd Women

circa 1675–1700

India; Rajasthan, former kingdom of Bundi

opaque watercolors and gold on paper
Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
Museum Acquisition
M.75.66

The circle dance of the Hindu god Krishna is understood to take place both at a particular time and place in our world and perpetually in the god's heaven. Whether earthly or celestial, other gods observe: "hundreds of celestial chariots crowded the sky, carrying the captivated denizens of the heavens along with their wives, their souls anxious to behold that scene."

Here, the artist integrates the forms and symbols most often associated with the *rasamandala*: the circle dance with Krishna at the center, musicians, trees, night sky, moon, lotus-filled pond, and celestial vehicles. The red dance field may be based on a textual reference in the ancient literary scripture that recounts the stories of the Hindu god Vishnu, the Bhagavata Purana, where the dance

is bathed in a reddish radiance cast by the moon. The painting includes two unusual features: Krishna and his dance partner in the center are not on the ground but on a little platform; and Krishna raises, on one hand, a very small female dancer.

Celebrations in Honor of Krishna's Birth

circa 1680–1690

central India

opaque watercolors on paper

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond,

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jay Dehejia

86.169

Village dancers and musicians playing hand cymbals, a drum, and a flute join in a celebratory circle dance. The performers hold sticks, so presumably, their dance resembles the traditional stick dances of northern India and Pakistan.

The occasion of the dance is the apparent birth of Krishna. To protect him from a wicked king, the infant Krishna was secretly exchanged with another baby and raised by foster parents. Here his foster father, Nanda, is being honored for the arrival of a son. He stands in the middle of the circle with two cowherders, who have brought pots of milk and curds to purify him. Compartments around the central circle show related happenings, such as Nanda bathing himself, priests reading holy texts, and so on. Celebrations commemorating the arrival of Krishna continue today as part of Nandamahotsava (Nanda's great festival).

**Krishna Dances with the Cowherd
Women, Personifying the Musical Mode
megh malhar
circa 1720**

India; Rajasthan, Pratapgarh

opaque watercolors on paper
San Diego Museum of Art, Edwin Binney 3rd Collection
1990.654

A *ragamala* is a series of paintings that envision musical melodies in divine or human form. In such works, text, image, and melody align in one cohesive expression that evokes an emotional response in the viewer. Viewing this painting, of Krishna's monsoon dance, evokes the *raga megh malhar* ("cloud thunder") and arouses a sense of love and longing in the knowledgeable viewer. A musician playing a "cloud melody" from the *malhar* family of melodies would awaken these feelings and could also bring the monsoon rains.

The conduit connecting the emotional power of music to the arousal of love and longing were musicians and dancers, who were often

perceived as the embodiment of this yearning. Here, the sound of the heavy downpour adds to the cacophony of the musicians' performance, Krishna's movements, and the intense longing for union. The result is an experience stimulating both aural and visual senses at once.

**Krishna Dances to the Accompaniment
of Female Musicians, Personifying the
Musical Mode *vasanta ragini***
circa 1675–1700

India; Rajasthan, former kingdom of Marwar

opaque watercolors and gold on paper
Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
Gift of Paul F. Walter
M.81.280.3

Under a canopy of blossoming trees, a musical quartet dances and infuses the air with sweet melodies to denote the arrival of spring. This page comes from a *ragamala*, a series of paintings that envision musical modes in divine or human forms. These paintings blend music, image, and poetry by depicting lush landscapes and elaborate court scenes. Here, the mode is personified as Krishna and the cowherd women, who have gathered along a riverbank to celebrate the spring festival of Holi.

The artist has introduced subtleties and improvisation in this depiction of *vasanta ragini*. The female cymbal player in the lower right corner poses as

if she were about to walk across the border of the painting like a tightrope. Her feet are lightly planted one before the other, and her taut torso conveys the precision and control needed to maintain balance.

**Krishna Dances with the Cowherd
Women From a Manuscript of the
Balagopalastuti (Praise for the Young Lord
of the Cowherds)**
circa 1450–1475

India; Gujarat

opaque watercolors, ink, and touches of gold
and silver on paper

Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
Purchased with funds provided by Lizabeth Scott
M.88.49

In an image that merges Krishna's form as a young cowherder with his divine self, the god is here shown with four arms. Two hands hold a flute to his lips; with another, he sounds a horn. The fourth arm, flung above his head, signifies his ecstatic dance. The playing of musical instruments adds an aural, visual, and devotional quality to Krishna's portrayal. Music and dance are aspects of the god's divine power, intrinsically linked to his physical expression and symbolic of his power of attraction. Here, two cowherd women flank the god on either side, intoxicated by his presence.

The fifteenth-century text from which this image originates praises the god in a series of Sanskrit verses, paraphrased here:

While the sound "dhunga, dhunga"
is softly tapped out on the drum,
and the women of Vraja follow him,
Krishna, the son of Devaki,
dances on the charming courtyard
stage and plays his flute.

left

**Covering Cloth with Scene of Krishna
Dancing with the Cowherd Women**
circa 1850–1900

India; Himachal Pradesh, Chamba region

cotton with silk embroidery and metal strips
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Transfer from
the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of
Carlotta Maybury 1993.91

Four Krishnas dance with four cowherd women in a radial arrangement with their heads toward the center and their feet pointing out. In the center, where we often find Krishna dancing with or without a partner, he sits ready to play his flute, while a young woman, perhaps to be understood as his beloved Radha, offers him refreshment.

The patterning here is insistent. Around the circle of dancers are arrayed, in regular fashion, eight cows, eight banana plants, and sixteen cowherd boys. The artist seems to delight in introducing small variations into the pattern. The cows are of assorted colors, and some are spotted; three sets

of boys cavort with herding sticks and branches, while others play musical instruments; pea-cocks are regularly positioned above the cows: we expect eight, but one is a different sort of bird.

right

**Krishna Plays the Flute and Dances
with the Cowherd Women with Modern
Silver Flute**

circa 1700–1900

southern India

bronze

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,
The Avery Brundage Collection
B77B5

Though Krishna is often seen playing his flute, and does so alluringly when he first draws the cowherd women to him in the nighttime forest, he is usually not depicted playing it when he dances in the center of the *rasamandala*, or circle dance. Here, though, he is, as can be understood from the position of two of his arms. This is not the usual Krishna of the *rasamandala* but a crowned, multiarmed Krishna as supreme deity. Behind Krishna is a star hexagram, an ancient Indian mystical diagram associated with the god and with the unification of apparent opposites, such as the divine and the earthly.

At first glance, the arrangement of the dancers in the circle would seem to be radial, with all feet oriented inward, but the artist has reversed the dancers in the lower half to keep them upright. Thus, the pairs of dancers at the transition points find themselves dancing with partners who are upside down.

A Jain Spiritual Teacher in a Heavenly Preaching Hall Surrounded by Dancers and Musicians From a Manuscript of the Sangrahani Sutra

circa 1575

western India

opaque watercolors and ink on paper
Collection of Gursharan and Elvira Sidhu

With lively footwork and varied gestures, celestial dancers join acrobats and musicians in honoring a teacher in the Jain spiritual tradition who has recently achieved omniscience, or Enlightenment. Celestials have descended and built a tiered structure (seen here from above) at the summit of which the *Jina* ("spiritual teacher") sits enthroned. He delivers to all corners of the universe a lecture on spiritual matters. According to tradition, gods—including the king of the gods, Indra (not represented)—and other beings laud him and celebrate the great event.

The artist has positioned some of the dancers facing toward and some away from the direction

they appear to be moving, imparting a high-spirited dynamism that contrasts with the serene stillness of the Omniscient One at the center. The animation of the dancers, acrobats, and other figures, together with the vibrant color scheme, suggests the joyousness, as well as the solemnity, of the occasion.

Initiation Card Depicting a Dancing dakini

1700–1800

central Tibet

opaque watercolors on paper

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond,

Purchased with funds provided by Mimi

and Perk Wilson

88.62.2

A female Tantric Buddhist figure called a *dakini* (sky-walker) dances wildly. She is without clothing, indicating that she is completely transparent and without guile. Her wild hair and ostentatious display suggest a lack of self-consciousness and complete spontaneity. This is the goal of her dance and a quality of full enlightenment.

Himalayan art traditions employ various techniques for visually and ritually depicting a mandala, a meditative visual aid usually depicted through an arrangement of geometric squares, circles, and often figures, as well as the symbolic beings who populate them. This card comes from a series where each symbolic being was portrayed on a separate card. Each being in the mandala could then be introduced

in succession to the initiated student. Using mandalas, a teacher monk could encourage their student to identify with the being and learn its lessons.

Subjugation

In Hindu and Buddhist contexts, dance sometimes accompanies—or even brings about—the conquest of negative forces. Deities are shown dancing on corpses personifying death and ignorance, or atop demons who attempt to overthrow order. The Buddhist deity Hevajra steps on four demons that embody evil, his dance transcending their combined power. Shiva slays an elephant demon through dance, releasing the malignant powers that threaten him. Krishna dances atop the serpent demon Kaliya, restoring universal order. And the mother goddesses dance with ecstatic abandon to overpower negative forces. Through dance, the fear of death, impurity, illusion, and ultimately ego-attachment are defeated. These dances are extreme spiritual practices that foster transformation: deities dance to release, to overcome, to remove illusion, and to mark the victory over time and death. By staging rituals in which the dances were evoked or enacted, kings could mobilize supernatural powers to aid in their assertions of hegemony.

Negative forces can also be expressed through dance, often in attempts to seduce and disempower

in circumstances where romance and sexuality are potent weapons to overcome. The demon Mara, a personification of evil, sent his daughters to tempt the Buddha as he sat meditating. The demon's daughters appeared before him as women of different ages and occupations, suiting any taste or fancy. The Buddha's stoic resistance to temptations of the flesh demonstrates power, strength, and good over evil; to overcome is to transmit such earthly desires into a manifestation of wisdom and knowledge. This, too, can be witnessed through dance.

The Poet-Saint Sambandar

1200–1400

India; Tamil Nadu

bronze

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,

The Avery Brundage Collection

B60B1016

Sambandar, a Hindu poet-saint devoted to Shiva, is often shown as a child dancing in exultation. His religious expression centers singing and dancing, with emphasis on worship through ecstatic poetry and movement. Dancing images show him with one leg raised, arms spread wide, and the index finger of his right hand pointed upward and towards the goddess Parvati.

A historical figure born in the seventh century, Sambandar, as a young child, was left hungry next to a sacred tank while his father took a ritual bath. Shiva's wife, Parvati, appeared and gave him milk. Sambandar is then said to have burst into song honoring the god and goddess. He went on to compose over four hundred hymns in praise of

Shiva throughout his life and made pilgrimages to important Shiva shrines, performing miracles and singing poems.

Cosmic Form of Krishna

circa 1800–1900

India; Rajasthan or Gujarat

opaque watercolors and ink on cloth

Lent by Julia Emerson

For those who worship him, Krishna is the Supreme Being, encompassing every aspect of the universe. In a famous passage of the great Hindu epic the Mahabharata, Krishna allows the hero Arjuna to see him in his transcendent form. Devotees may also see Krishna in his true form through meditation and visualization.

Here, the immense form of the supreme Krishna looms into space. The circle dance with the cowherd women is shown twice: on Krishna's lower body and again, far above, in his heaven. This reminds the devotee that the dance of divine love takes place eternally in this celestial realm, while the earthly version happens at a particular moment and place.

Dervishes Dancing Before a Group of Muslim Divines

circa 1760

south-central India; Deccan region

opaque watercolors and gold on paper

San Diego Museum of Art, Edwin Binney 3rd Collection
1990.544

During a nighttime gathering at a Sufi Muslim meeting house, a teacher engages in discussion. Below, the devotional music and poetry of the musicians and singer have helped one Sufi enter an ecstatic state, and he dances at the center of the circle. His eyes are closed, and his finger points skyward as if attesting to the unity of divine existence (and perhaps to his teacher's guidance). Fellow disciples protectively encircle him so that his transported state is not disturbed.

Many mystical Sufi orders include in their meditative spiritual practices the *sama'* (audition) comprising prayer, devotional poetry, singing, music, and sometimes dance. In this context, rhythmic dance-like movement is understood as the expression

of rapture experienced by the mystic who, while listening to devotional poetry and music with the "ear of the heart," finds a heightened understanding and awareness of the divine.

The Saint Chaitanya Dances in Ecstasy

circa 1750

India; Rajasthan, former kingdom of Kishangarh

opaque watercolors on paper

The Kronos Collections

The earth-born saint Chaitanya, who lived some five hundred years ago, is thought of by his followers as an incarnation of Krishna himself, or as incorporating qualities of both Krishna and Krishna's beloved Radha. His singing and dancing were said to have been filled with rapturous love that radiated to all who saw him. He might become so overwhelmed with emotion that tears poured from his eyes while he danced.

In this painting, Chaitanya's exaltation—an expression of *bhakti*, passionate devotion to a god, particularly Krishna—inspires his followers. They throw their arms into the air as they play instruments and dance; one prostrates himself or perhaps faints. Traditions developed by Chaitanya have descended, by complicated routes, to become the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (the "Hare Krishna" movement),

whose members still express their devotion to Krishna and their hopes for peace and universal love through music and dance.



Scan the code to view a video clip that interprets the movements and meanings suggested by this artwork.

Dancing Hevajra Surrounded by Dancing Yoginis

circa 1050–1100

northeastern Thailand; former kingdom of Angkor

bronze

Cleveland Museum of Art, gift of Maxeen and John Flower in honor of Dr. Stanislaw Czuma

2011.143

In a three-dimensional realization of the mandala of Hevajra, the god dances on a demonic corpse embodying delusion and fear. Mandalas are diagrams for meditation and visualization that often resemble the ground plan of a palace, with deities arranged in patterns. Following the symbolism of the Hevajra Tantra, the key text for understanding the nature, powers, and symbolism of the god, eight dancing yoginis surround Hevajra.

Angkor—an empire that included present-day Cambodia and parts of Thailand and Vietnam—had long been in touch with centers of religious learning in India, and a version of the Hevajra Tantra was known there. However, while several related

artworks survive, scholars have not worked out the details of how the Hevajra cult in Angkor functioned.

Lotus Mandala of Hevajra with Eight Dancing Yoginis and Eight Cremation Grounds

circa 1100–1200

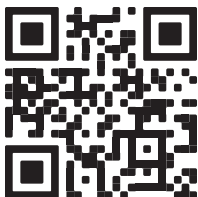
northeastern India

copper alloy

Rubin Museum of Art

C2003.10.2, HAR65207

At the center of this eight-petaled lotus there once would have been figures, now missing, of Hevajra and his consort Nairatmya (“No-Self”) dancing in a sexual embrace. Arrayed around the center are the eight dancing yoginis who often accompany the god. Represented on the outside of the lotus petals are the eight great cremation grounds in which the dancing takes place. Above these on each petal is a skilled practitioner who has, through intense meditation and ritual practice, attained extraordinary spiritual powers.



Scan the code to view a video clip that interprets the movements and meanings suggested by this artwork.

Hevajra and his Consort Dancing

1000–1200

northeastern India, Bangladesh, or possibly Tibet

stone (perhaps kaolinite) and pigments

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Bequest
from the Estate of Mary Shepherd Slusser

2018.128

The deity Hevajra is of great importance in the Tantric Buddhist practices associated with northeastern India, Cambodia, northeastern Thailand, and Tibet. Representations of the god often show him dancing with his consort or surrounded by dancing yoginis. The variety of emblems he holds symbolizes his universal mastery over all things, living or dead, on earth, in the underworld, or in the heavens.

Ritual Conch Shell with Depiction of Buddhist Deity Hevajra

circa 1200

Cambodia or Thailand;
former kingdom of Angkor

shell and bronze

Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund
1977.176

Here, Hevajra, in his eight-headed, sixteen-armed form, dances without his troupe of yoginis. He is poised on the corpse of a demon representing obstacles a skilled practitioner overcomes through meditation, ritual practice, and identification with Hevajra.

Dozens of ritual conches from the kingdom of Angkor bearing the image of Hevajra are known, suggesting that rituals invoking him were, at certain places and times, widespread. Some, like this one, are actual conch shells with bronze fittings; others are made entirely of bronze, and may have been used for holding and pouring sacred liquids in religious rites.

Mold for Tablets Depicting the Buddhist Deity Hevajra, with Modern Clay Impression

circa 1175–1225

Thailand or Cambodia; former kingdom of Angkor

earthenware

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frank H. Koehler
1989.16.4

Only two dancing yoginis flank Hevajra on this small mold, but presumably, they stand for the usual eight. Several metal molds for making terracotta tablets of Hevajra are known, but this is the only known one made of earthenware. The tablet displayed here is a modern impression. The existence of molds suggests that a significant number of tablets were needed, but little is known about their function. Were they used in rituals? Were they offerings? Did the elaborate tablets have a different purpose from the simpler ones made from this mold? Future research may help resolve these questions.

The Buddhist Deity Kurukulla

1500–1600

Tibet

distemper on cotton, mounted on silk brocade
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of John Goelet
67.819

When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the Buddhist deity Kurukulla dances out her passion, in both bronze and painted form. In the painting, she draws her bow, nocks an arrow, and, just as she fires, we notice that the arrowhead is a flower. And when it strikes its target, the victim will be smitten—not overcome by pain but subjugated by love. The bronze sculpture nearby would once have held a bow and arrow too.

Kurukulla may seem an unlikely lover. She is laden with symbolism that shows her link with death. She treads upon a corpse, wears jewelry of bone, and has the fierce flames of the cremation ground flaring behind her. But there is no contradiction because love and death are not the diametric opposites they might seem. Kurukulla reveals that the dance of life and the dance of death are not two separate performances, but rather two aspects of the same.

The Buddhist Deity Kurukulla

circa 1700–1800

China

bronze with gilding

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,

The Avery Brundage Collection

B60B137

The Buddhist deity Kurukulla dances with and through the power of love. Multiple strands of pearls and jewels cross her torso, accentuating her supple form, while the scarves draped around her neck billow near her feet. The corpse underfoot is similarly animated, with knee bent and hair loose behind their head. Like the painted version of Kurukulla positioned nearby, this bronze sculpture of the deity would have once held a bow and arrow in two of her four hands. When the arrowhead is released and makes contact, the target is overcome by love.

Mandala of Hevajra

1461

Tibet

distemper on cotton

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of John Goelet
67.823

Within a stylized palace surrounded by cremation grounds, the eight-headed, sixteen-armed Hevajra dances with his consort and eight yoginis. Surrounding the pair are eight goddesses, illustrated in a multitude of colors, and each positioned in a dance posture, with their right leg folded and right arm extended upwards. This painting is a two-dimensional version of the mandala described in the Hevajra Tantra and represented in an abbreviated way in the Angkorian bronze object nearby.

In the worship of Hevajra, initiated practitioners meditated and undertook rituals—probably including dancing—to merge with the deity. If they were successful, they gained great powers in both spiritual and secular realms, powers that we might think of as magic. For example, they could not only

conquer the mental and psychological forces that hampered their progress but also defeat worldly enemies such as rival armies.

Mandala of Hevajra

circa 1400

central Tibet

opaque watercolors on cloth

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Berthe and John Ford Collection, gift of the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation

91.509

More than ninety deities dance in this complex mandala, whose forms multiply in a fractal-like way. The central eight-petaled lotus with Hevajra and eight yoginis is surrounded by four similar lotus configurations, and dozens more figures dance beyond the circular boundary of this system. We may imagine such a spectacle as it might have been enacted in a large-scale performance of ritualized movement and dance, versions of which are still conducted today. Or, we may visualize this great confluence of forms as taking place in the cosmic realm. The ceaseless energy represented by dance is here marshaled and subjected to order.

Maharakta Ganesha

circa 1575–1625

central Tibet

opaque watercolors on cloth

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond,

Gift of Berthe and John Ford

91.511

This deity—the Tibetan Buddhist Maharakta (Great Red) Ganesha—is said to dance beside a lapis lazuli rock mountain but is rarely shown doing so. Here, however, the blue and green crags of the mountain are represented in detail, with trees and birds adorning them. The mountain rears up in a night sky scattered with flowers and auspicious Buddhist symbols, emphasizing the celestial vastness of the scene.

This form of dancing Ganesha is much more common in the Tantric Buddhist traditions of Tibet than elsewhere. A centuries-old text provides guidance to initiates and artists: “The worshipper should conceive himself as god Gaṇapati of red complexion, wearing the crown of chignon, who is decked in all ornaments, has twelve arms,

protruding belly and one face...[He] stands...in a dancing attitude, is three-eyed, and has one tusk... and rides the mouse on the red lotus."

Eight-armed Dancing Ganesha

circa 1600–1800

Nepal; Kathmandu Valley

wood

Art Institute of Chicago,
gift of Marilyn B. Alsdorf
2014.1042

Temple Banner with the Buddhist Deity Padmanarteshvara Dancing

circa 1600–1700

Nepal

pigments and black ink on cloth

Art Institute of Chicago, James W. and Marilyn Alsdorf Collection

1984.1503

At the center of this banner dances the Lord of the Lotus Dance Padmanarteshvara, a secret form of the Buddhist deity Avalokiteshvara seldom seen outside Nepal. To either side of Padmanarteshvara dance bird-headed female figures—one a crow, one a vulture—holding warlike implements. These figures are hard to name because only practitioners of Padmanarteshvara's meditation are allowed access to the appropriate sacred text. Participants in the ritual would expect this auspicious dance to generate vast amounts of positive energy that leads to better rebirths and, ultimately, enlightenment.

Large horizontal banners like this are central within Tantric Buddhist rituals in Nepal. These banners are

magical: their imagery symbolically transforms the place where they hang into the sacred space known as a mandala and aids medi- tators in visualizing the deities that populate it. As the flower-and-skull garlands overhead suggest, that sacred ground is where life and death meet.

The Deity Simhavaktra

circa 1736–1795

China; Beijing or vicinity, Hebei province

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,
The Avery Brundage Collection
B60S600

In Tibetan and related Chinese Tantric Buddhist traditions, the genesis of enlightenment requires the closing down of negativity. The *dakini* (tantric deity) Simhavaktra is the Lion-Faced Sky-Walker, so called not only for her ability to fly but also to reduce all negativity to emptiness via meditation.

Simhavaktra balances in a version of a classical Indian dancing position. In Tibetan Buddhist imagery, this posture signifies dynamism. In Simhavaktra's case, it shows her transforming five psychological poisons into five corresponding wisdoms. This transformation occurs in a practitioners' mind when they visualize the deity in their meditation. Simhavaktra's imagery is associated with the cycle of destruction and transformation always occurring in ancient cremation grounds. It was there that yogis—and

dakinis—attempted to attain enlightenment in this life by realizing and internalizing that all objects of attraction or repulsion are impermanent.

I Dewa Nyoman Leper
(Indonesian, 1917–1984)

**Dance Performance with Barong
and Rangda**
circa 1935–1939

ink and colors on paper
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,
Gift of David Salman and Walter Jared Frost
2016.288

The long shaggy body of the Barong, a lionlike protective animal spirit, twists both head and tail toward the men on one side of him. This forms a barrier between them and the menacing presence behind him, which is likely Rangda, a fierce female practitioner of black magic. She looms over the Barong holding a magic cloth that renders her invisible.

The Barong and Rangda are central figures in various ritual performances that occur throughout southern Bali. Music and dance do more than just punctuate Balinese ritual life; they can form the core of certain sacrificial offerings. Barongs take part in processions and in dances at the time

of temple festivals, during Galungan (an annual celebration of ancestral spirits), in rituals to ward off dangers, and on other occasions, including tourist performances.



Scan the code to view a video clip that interprets the movements and meanings suggested by this artwork.

Ben Shahn (American, 1898–1969)

Barong Dance, Bali

1960

gelatin silver print

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum,

Gift of Bernarda Bryson Shahn

P1970.5257, P1970.2358

In this dance, the Barong, a guardian lionlike spirit, battles with the sorceress Rangda. Their confrontation, described often as a battle between good and evil, is much more complex, as Rangda is both feared and respected. Ultimately, the performance concerns not her defeat but an attempt to find universal cosmic balance.

The American artist Ben Shahn captured these photographs on a trip to Bali where he documented a tourist performance. The first shows the encounter between a follower of Rangda and a young nobleman in Barong's form. The two fight, and eventually, the Barong's followers come to his aid. Western visitors were fascinated by these dance dramas, and from the 1930s, performances

were commissioned for entertainment. Despite efforts by the Balinese government to distinguish between sacred and secular performances, dances considered sacred are now performed for tourists, and dances first presented in a secular context are now incorporated into temple ceremonies.

Rarung, a Demonic Figure

circa 1800–1900

Indonesia; Bali

wood with metal, paint, and leather

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Gift of Thomas Murray in memory of his father Eugene T. Murray
2000.37

Here, an apprentice of Rangda, the queen of black magic who roams graveyards at night, stands in a posture common to Balinese dance: knees half-bent and slightly splayed, elbows raised to shoulder height.

Tales about Rangda and Rarung begin with a widow and sorceress called Calon Arang and have a long literary and performance history in Bali. A version of the tale tells of a land stricken by a plague caused by this widow. The king sent his priest and adviser to investigate and directed him to marry the sorceress's daughter and steal her book of magic. The priest fought the widow using the stolen book, and in anger, she transformed herself into the terrifying form of Rangda. Calon Arang, or Rangda, summons her disciples in the graveyard and instructs them to dance frenetically.

Shiva, the Seven Mother Goddesses, and Ganesha Dance

circa 800–900

India; Madhya Pradesh

sandstone

Los Angeles County Museum of Art,

Gift of Paul F. Walter

M.80.157

*When [the demonic force Raktabija] was slain,
the band of Mothers danced about, intoxicated
by his blood. (Devi Mahatmya, 8.62)*

The Hindu text known as the Devi Mahatmya recounts how a group of *matrikas* (mother goddesses)—who are female manifestations of the shakti (energy) of male deities—joined the Great Goddess to overcome a powerful demon and his destructive force. They celebrate by drinking the blood of the vanquished demon and dancing frenetically. Afterward, the mother goddesses are absorbed by the Great Goddess, which suggests they were and are always part of her creative energy. While the exact number of goddesses

depicted could fluctuate, their power lies in their multiplicity.

Here, seven matrikas are captured in motion, knees bent and torsos swaying. With Shiva on the far left and Ganesha on the far right, they are: Brahmani (the embodied energy of the god Brahma); Maheshvari (Shiva); Kaumari (Skanda/Kumara, Shiva's son); Vaishnavi (Vishnu); Varahi (Varaha, Vishnu's boar incarnation); Indrani (Indra, king of the gods); and Chamunda (the Great Goddess; the only matrika related to a female deity).

Two Fragments from a Panel Depicting Ganesha and Mother Goddesses Dancing

circa 900–1100

Nepal

copper repoussé

Art Institute of Chicago, Helen A. Regenstein
Endowment 1996.431a, b

The vigorous dance of the mother goddesses is seen here through the movement of their garments and scarves, which reverberate to the rhythm of their bodies. In Nepal, the order of the figures often has an alternate sequence; as seen in the first fragment from this panel, where Ganesha leads from the left. The variety of figures and their placement in reliefs from India and Nepal speaks to the subtle evolution of Hindu and Buddhist practice and belief. This object would have originally covered and protected images made in clay or wood. Note the hand gesture of the skeletal Chamunda, usually called Kali or Mahakali in Nepal, on the far right of the second fragment. Known in Nepal as *bindu mudra*, this gesture communicates that the goddess is flicking drops of wine or blood towards the deities as a tantric offering.

The Mother Goddess Chamunda Dancing

circa 800–1000

India; Rajasthan

sandstone

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Avery

Brundage Collection

B62S39+

*When worlds collide, explode, and shatter
Like bolts of thunder their clamor provides
the beat of your dance.*

*When in that awesome void blood-oozing demons
sport and sing aloud the gleeful refrain of their song,
the unceasing beat of their verses
echo the thud of your footsteps.*

*O Kali, Chamundi, Kankali,
your dance is a dance of ecstasy.*

*Mother, O Mother, lured helplessly,
I watch your rapturous dance.*

(excerpt from "Dance of Annihilation"

by Subrahmanya Bharati (1882–1921))A macabre

vision, with legs bent in the motion of dance,

Chamunda is portrayed emaciated, with a skull-

like face, protruding eyes, drooping breasts, and

a sunken belly. With her twelve arms, the goddess brandishes weapons, a skull cup, and, over her head, a corpse. The fierce goddess Kali was named "Chamunda" after she defeated the threatening demons, Chanda and Munda. Chamunda decapitated them in battle, drinking their blood and destroying their army. In victory, she danced ecstatically, shaking the foundation of the universe.

Chamunda holds a skull cup full of wine or blood, wears a necklace of severed heads, and carries an array of weapons. The last hand gestures to her mouth, indicating again her insatiable hunger. She embodies both destructive and protective aspects and represents universal power unleashed.

The Mother Goddess Chamunda Dancing

circa 900–1100

India; Madhya Pradesh, Khajuraho

sandstone

Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, gift
of Mr. and Mrs. Howard E. Houston
1974.64

Carved in high relief to highlight her curved form, this image of Chamunda communicates the movement of her frenzied dance through her swaying necklace of skulls and breasts. Many depictions of Chamunda show her dancing on a corpse, signifying triumph over ego and ignorance.

The matrikas (mother goddesses), particularly Chamunda and Varahi, embody seemingly contradictory qualities of destruction and compassion. Emaciated Chamunda and the sow-headed Varahi visually contrast with the feminine ideal of the other matrikas and are the most transgressive of the mothers. Varahi, positioned in the lower right corner, feasts on the blood that drips into her skull cup from the decapitated head held in one of Chamunda's hands.

The Mother Goddess Vaishnavi Dancing

circa 800–900

India; Madhya Pradesh or Rajasthan

sandstone

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Gift Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, gift of Paul Mellon
68.8.12

With her body dynamically posed as if in full motion, the mother goddess Vaishnavi is the female emanation of the shakti (elemental power or essence) of the male deity Vishnu. She wears his miter-shaped crown and carries with her the weapons and attributes of the god, including his discus, conch shell, and club. While shown as pensive and serene, Vaishnavi is anything but. She set upon the demonic force Raktabija with her discus weapon in battle and then danced madly in victory.

Sometimes depicted holding children, seated, dancing, or carrying weapons, the mother goddesses embody both creative and destructive elements. Their limitless feminine energy can take the form of guardians, warriors, loving mothers, and custodians of supreme knowledge.

Shiva as Slayer of the Elephant Demon

circa 1800–1900

southern India

wood

Simon Ray, London

Shiva dances on multiple occasions, and his body morphs and changes in response. Often, he dances to invoke destruction, praise, or joy. Here, he moves in triumph after defeating the elephant demon Gajasura. Portrayed with eight arms is Shiva, seen only in his most aggressive and combative forms. Two of his arms raised overhead presumably hold the flayed skin of the elephant demon aloft; the others hold a sword, a snake, a drum, his trident, and a mace. His final hand presents a gesture of fearlessness, also reflected in his serene expression. Shiva dances on the decapitated head of the demon, transcending the wickedness of the demonic force and once again restoring order.

Shiva as Slayer of the Elephant Demon

circa 1000–1100

India; Tamil Nadu

granite

Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund
1962.164

The wrathful Shiva appears with bulging eyes, protruding fangs, and wild hair in a striking posture that evokes the dominance and strength of the god. His left leg is raised high, revealing the head of the elephant demon he has killed. He holds the elephant's flayed skin overhead in a dance of triumph. In the culmination of this dance, Shiva flings the skin high into the air before it comes to rest around his shoulders as a garment. One of Shiva's *ganas* (attendants) provides the rhythm of his dance by beating a drum in the lower left corner. Shiva's wife, Parvati, dances along in the lower right.

The demonic form of the elephant has been understood as a metaphor for the wandering mind of the devotee. His distracting presence needs to be vanquished by Shiva so that devotees can better focus on the god himself.

The Dance of Shiva and Kali

circa 1780

India; Punjab Hills, former kingdom of Guler

opaque watercolors and gold on paper

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Adolph D.
and Wilkins C. Williams Fund

82.141

The goddess Kali dances with wild abandon, and her garland of skulls, tiger skin skirt, and loose hair are all thrust to the right by her vigorous movements. Her emaciated form signifies a primordial hunger; she feasts on animals and drinks their blood to replenish her energy, needed to sustain the universe. Her attendants hold weapons and drink from skull cups of intoxicating blood, signifying Kali's power to defeat false consciousness or ego.

Shiva, clad only in serpents and accompanied by his animal-headed attendants, provides the rhythm for her dance. Kali, an emanation of Shiva's shakti, or energy, shares his attributes—including a third eye and crescent moon. Shiva and Kali dance in many instances: in joy, triumph, competition, and victory.

Always, though, Kali's dance is imbued with the possibility to transform negative elements prevalent in the universe.

The Sage Shuka Remains Unmoved as Rambha Dances Before Him

circa 1600

India; Rajasthan, possibly Bikaner

opaque watercolor and gold on paper

San Diego Museum of Art, Edwin Binney

3rd Collection

1990.778

Paintings from this dispersed series illustrate a Sanskrit text called the *Rambha-Shuka Samvad* (The dialogue between Shuka and Rambha). It presents a tale of seduction, where a sage, Shuka, is visited by Rambha, a celestial dancer of undeniable beauty. Rambha enters a philosophical debate with the sage, where she argues that a life lived without bodily desires is not worth living. He replies that a life is wasted if one cannot rise above such physical manifestations of longing. Here, Rambha is seen dancing before Shuka and surrounded by buzzing bees that represent the sweetness of her singing voice. Rambha, cast as the temptress, attempts to seduce, and disempower the austere sage with her sexuality. It is a role she often embodies in literary

and Hindu devotional texts, where she wields her beauty and accomplished dancing and singing abilities to distract devout men.

The Temptation of the Buddha by the Demon Mara's Daughters

1561

Nepal

distemper on cotton

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of John Goelet
67.846

As the Buddha-to-be meditated on his spiritual path to Enlightenment, the demon Mara, a symbol of evil and death, unleashed not only his brutish army to overcome him by force, but also his daughters to turn the Buddha-to-be away from his spiritual goal by seduction. The theme of beautiful women using allurements, often including dance, to beguile a male ascetic is common. For a certain mindset, a woman dancing was especially to be distrusted. An ancient Buddhist text, known in Nepal during the period this work dates to, describes the daughter's tactics: "Some lifted their arms, waving them in the air to reveal their armpits...Some mischievously moved back and forth in a flirtatious manner. Some danced. Some sang. Some flirted and acted shy. Some shook their thighs like a palm

tree moved by the wind." As elsewhere, throughout the Indian cultural world—and for better or worse—admiration, attraction, fear, and repugnance compounded attitudes towards the female body.

Daughters of the Demon Mara

circa 1470–1480

Myanmar (Burma); Bago (Pegu), Ajapala's temple

terracotta with glaze

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,

Museum purchase

B86P14

As recorded in texts and artworks from across the Indian cultural world, the demon Mara, a symbol of evil and death, emboldened his daughters to use dance and seduction to overcome the Buddha-to-be as he meditated. Mara relied on both physical force, his army, as well as his daughter's seductive powers to disrupt his spiritual path to Enlightenment. This glazed terracotta plaque showing Mara's daughters is from a set intended for a fifteenth-century temple in southern Myanmar. We see two daughters bedecked in jewelry, and the inscription tells us they have assumed the form of women who have not yet had children. Are they performing a seductive dance—like they seem to be in the painting nearby—or some other sort of movement?

Pushpamala N (Indian, b. 1956)

Indrajaala/Seduction

2012

video, 4 min. 30 sec.

Lent by the artist

In this triptych, Pushpamala N interprets an episode from the literary epic the *Ramayana*, casting herself as the main character. In the story, the exiled hero Rama, with his wife, Sita, and faithful brother, live in the forest. A giant female demon named Shurpanakha comes upon the family and proposes marriage to Rama, offering to eat Sita to be rid of her. Rama, making fun of Shurpanakha, suggests she marry his brother instead.

As the video begins, Rama's brother is practicing dance-like swordplay. Shurpanakha appears in her hideous form but, in a burst of flame, transforms into a beautiful woman. She dances for Rama's brother, but he remains unmoved. He repeatedly slashes his sword, cutting off her ears and nose. The word Indrajaala in the title means illusion or delusion. Is this in reference to the deceptions

experienced by the characters, to Shurpanakha's ability to shapeshift, or to the illusory power of film?

Mohini Killing the Demon Bhasmasura by Making Him Touch His Own Head While Dancing

circa 1900–1925

India; Maharashtra, Ghatkopar

poster

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,
Library Special Collections

Dance and seduction are closely interconnected, often working to ensure or thwart righteous purposes. In the story of Bhasmasura, a mighty and ambitious demon performs extreme austerities and (as usually happens in Hindu myths) thereby gains the attention of one of the great gods—in this instance, Shiva. Shiva offers him a favor, and Bhasmasura asks for the power to turn anyone to ashes by touching them on the head. On receiving the favor, Bhasmasura threatens to use his power on Shiva, who flees, calling on Vishnu for assistance. Vishnu takes the form of Mohini, a beautiful, seductive woman, and challenges Bhasmasura to match her dancing. He gets wrapped up in the erotically charged competition and carelessly mirrors her when she touches her head. He falls to ashes.

Glorification

Dancers, celestial and mortal, perform to honor both gods and kings. Having a corps of dancers attached to the palace was customary for royalty and was seen as an attribute of kingship. It was also a way to connect royal and divine power through association with Indra, the king of the gods, who is perpetually entertained by heavenly dancers.

Dance was (and is) important in some royal ceremonies, where both joy and reverence are communicated through dance. Mughal emperors incorporated dance in significant life milestones such as wedding and birth celebrations. Rajasthani rulers sat in attendance in grand palace settings, witnessing dance performances while also being seen by courtiers and attendants. These dances often complicate the idea of reverence as they honor both god and king. The performers and the patrons who commission them seek both piety and compassion through performances that blur lines between devotion and entertainment.

In this way, ideas of glorification in both divine and earthly realms are conflated with dance expressing

or displaying power. Sometimes it is the power of a king, where the symbolism of dance is used to reinforce or magnify power. Or sometimes power is explicitly linked with an appearance of piety, as when a patron paid for dancers to enact a sacred story and then has himself painted observing.

Krishna Overcoming the Serpent Kaliya

circa 975–1025

India; Tamil Nadu

copper alloy

Asia Society, New York: Mr. and Mrs. John D.

Rockefeller 3rd Collection of Asian Art

1979.22

Whichever head he raised up, Krishna forced him to bow low, striking at it with his feet as he danced. (Bhagavata Purana, 10.1.29)

Krishna dances in an often-depicted scene from the Hindu text the Bhagavata Purana, where the god fights the snake-demon Kaliya who was poisoning the Yamuna River. This sculpture depicts the moment Krishna emerges from the river and dances on Kaliya's many heads. As Krishna dances, he delicately holds the end of the serpent tail in one hand. Krishna's body, wrapped in necklaces, bands of jewels across his chest, armbands, and anklets, brings an evocative aural quality to the dance, in which the bells on his anklets sound the snake-demon's defeat. Music and dance are aspects

of Krishna's divine power, intrinsically linked to his physical expression and emblematic of his power of attraction. Kaliya gazes up at the god, with hands together in homage and in admiration of Krishna's strength. It is believed that demons receive salvation when their power is overcome by a god. Their nearness to the divine brings blessing, and their focused determination during battle is a form of devotion.



Scan the code to view a video clip that interprets the movements and meanings suggested by this artwork.

Krishna Overcoming the Serpent Demon Kaliya

In the Hindu text the Bhagavata Purana, Krishna battles the multiheaded serpent demon Kaliya, who was poisoning the sacred Yamuna River. Krishna and his cowherd friends were on the banks of the river when several of their cattle died from drinking the water. After bringing them back to life, Krishna plunged into the river's depths and began to battle the snake. Krishna found himself ensnared in the mighty coils but sprang free by summoning the power of the universe and trapping the snake beneath his foot. Then, perched on the serpent's many hoods, Krishna began to dance. Kaliya submitted to Krishna's strength, and the river was purified. This dance is often visualized in sculptures, paintings, and other artforms as it represents the transcending of dualities and creates connection between earthly and divine realms.

Krishna Overcoming the Serpent Kaliya

circa 1690

India; Madhya Pradesh, Bundelkhand

opaque watercolors on paper

Lent by Gursharan and Elvira Sidhu

Krishna vigorously dances atop the snake-headed demon Kaliya while Krishna's family—foster parents Nanda and Yashoda and brother Balarama—await him on shore. The townspeople are also crowded onto the riverbank, watching in rapt attention while the story unfolds below from right to left. Krishna, shown twice, dances the demon into submission before receiving blessings from Kaliya's *nagas* and *naginis* (serpent clan) while seated atop a low throne. Finally, Kaliya and his family retreat to the ocean, leaving Krishna victorious. The river, a source of livelihood and necessity for the townspeople, is now purified from the demon's poison.

In recent years this story has been related to the pollution of India's rivers by harmful substances from manufacturing and other sources. Environmentalists urge that we follow Krishna's example to overcome polluters and return the rivers to cleanliness for the benefit of all.

Krishna Overcoming the Serpent Kaliya

1900–1950

southern India

wood with traces of gesso, and metal

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Avery

Brundage Collection

B61S51+

Krishna is shown in a lively dance, holding his flute in one hand and the tail of the poisonous serpent-demon Kaliya in the other. Scenes of Krishna overcoming Kaliya often include the demon's wives, who are depicted with serpent bodies and human torsos and heads. Here, as Krishna dances on the snake-demon's heads, the wives cluster around and plead with the god to show mercy. Krishna acquiesces and, instead of killing the serpent, orders him to leave the Yamuna River. Above, two women, likely villagers, also honor Krishna. Within the Bhagavata Purana, Krishna's flute is described as having a transfixing effect on women, animals, and even the natural world; perhaps the women here are similarly cast under Krishna's enchanting spell.

This wooden sculpture likely served as a panel for a rolling pilgrimage cart that would carry an image of a god in a temple procession. Traces of gesso suggest that this sculpture was once brightly colored.

Armlet with Krishna Overcoming the Serpent Kaliya

circa 1850–1900

India; Tamil Nadu, Chennai

gold, opalescent glass, and topaz

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by the Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, Museum Associates Purchase M.2002.83

Krishna's dance atop the snake-demon Kaliya is flanked on either side by female attendants who honor the god by waving fly whisks. Animals and mythical creatures punctuate the dense design of vine-like tendrils. In southern India, women would wear such intricately worked accessories on their upper arms. Adorning the body is a fundamental part of the South Asian aesthetic, where men and women wear jewelry to accentuate physical beauty and as an act of worship. Among other benefits, the embellishment of one's body can identify regional origin, lineage, or religious affiliation. Wearing this armlet identifies the wearer as a devotee of Krishna.

Dancers and Musicians Entertaining a Deity or Nobleman

circa 1075–1125

northeastern Thailand; former kingdom of Angkor

stone

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,
Gift of the Society for Asian Art and
the Michel D. Weill Bequest Fund
B72S3

This lintel depicts celestial *apsarases* (dancers) entertaining a princely male figure. The three dancers on the left move in unison, matching one another's posture and gestures, and the single dancer to the right mirrors their pose. These dancers are disciplined artists who, one imagines, have undertaken rigorous practice of the kind seen in recent centuries (and sometimes still) in Javanese, Balinese, Thai, and Cambodian court settings. While unidentifiable, the male figure's high status is marked by the platform he sits on, the parasols flanking him, and the attendant wielding a fan. A princely figure entertained by celestial dancers might be considered to be Indra, the king

of the gods. Yet, this figure lacks Indra's identifiable attributes of an elephant and a thunderbolt. The row of airborne wild geese indicates that the scene is transpiring in a heavenly realm. Thus, the dancers and musicians are celestial, not earthly beings.

Relief with Dancer and Musicians Honoring the Turban of the Buddha-to-be

circa 100–200

Pakistan; ancient region of Gandhara

stone (schist)

Royal Ontario Museum, Purchase was made possible with the support of The Reuben Wells Leonard Bequest Fund
939.17.15

When Prince Siddhartha, the Buddha-to-be, resolved to renounce his royal status and enter on a spiritual quest, he removed his headdress and cut off his hair as gestures of renunciation. The headdress and hair were carried by gods to the heaven of Indra, king of the gods, enshrined there and perpetually worshiped. Here, the headdress—presumably with the hair inside—is shown positioned on a throne. One worshipful deity stands nearby in a reverent pose; another throws handfuls of flowers. A little further to the left, a dancer and musicians perform to honor the great relics. Presumably, the dancer is one of the female celestial *apsarases* (dancers) who adorn and dance

in Indra's heaven. To suggest the dancer's dynamic movement, the artist shows her leaning and lifting one leg bent sharply at the knee. This position cannot be held for long, which suggests another movement is imminent.

Dancers and Musicians

circa 100–200

Pakistan; ancient Region of Gandhara

stone (schist)

Lent by Jimmy Bastian Pinto

Two dancers mirror each other's positions: right leg moving forward, left back, right hand held at the breast, left lifted above the head. We can imagine their graceful circling motion. The musicians flanking them play a harp-like instrument and a flute.

Because of its fragmentary nature, it is difficult to decipher this relief in its entirety. Beyond the harpist loom a large animal leg and paw; remains show that a similar leg and paw lay beyond the flutist.

These were the legs of a throne, probably for the Buddha. Many images of the Buddha from the same region and period have small scenes positioned below the Buddha and between the throne legs.

It is conceivable, then, that the complete image showed the Buddha defeating the demon Mara and achieving Enlightenment, with dancers and musicians celebrating the momentous event.

The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara with Dancers

circa 1050

Bangladesh

stone (phyllite)

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of the Council of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Juan March Foundation with additional funds from the Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund, 90.155 Beneath a gentle and dignified bodhisattva, a female performer and two musicians, playing a drum and small cymbals, dance. It would seem that they glorify the bodhisattva's compassion, a prime characteristic of Avalokiteshvara, manifested and symbolized here by the nectar he allows to drip from his outstretched hand to the starving needle-nosed ghost below. Behind the ghost, other figures pay homage through their reverent gestures and proffered flower garlands.

Is there another possible explanation for the dancing? The sacred Buddhist text known as the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* warns that the demon Mara (a personification

of ignorance and wrong thinking) intended to distract a bodhisattva through "songs, music, dances, poems, plays," among other deeds. Though this sculpture represents Avalokiteshvara rather than the Buddha, the unusually formal pose of the bodhisattva calls to mind images of the Buddha in the attitude of overcoming Mara and his seductive daughters.

Threshold of a Doorway with Dancers and Lions

circa 950–1000

central India

sandstone

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,

Museum purchase

B69S25

This frieze, with a lone female dancer flanked by a series of male musicians, was once part of the threshold of a temple doorway. Worshipers would have physically stepped over this door sill to reach the temple's inner chamber housing the main icon. The placement of these dancers at this lowered elevation most likely functioned to herald the visitor to the appearance of the deity and to celebrate its divine manifestation.

The architects and sculptors responsible for building north Indian temples from the tenth century and later followed manuals, written contemporaneously, that included codified instructions for the proportions of the body and placement of these reliefs within

the temple's design. Bent knees, angled arms, and shifted hips denote the subtleties of a body in motion and are captured here with sensitive observation.

Shiva and Parvati on the Bull Nandi, with Dancers and Musicians

956

India; Rajasthan, Harshagiri

sandstone

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art,
William Rockhill Nelson Trust
35-304

In the center of this architectural frieze sit Shiva and Parvati atop the bull Nandi, surrounded by dancers and musicians. The deep angular bend in the limbs of the dancing figures expresses a frenetic range of movement brought about by the drummer's beat. In contrast, the god and goddess sit serenely, arms entwined and eyes locked in an adoring gaze.

While the hilltop temple buildings of Harshagiri (harsha=joy; giri=mountain) are no longer standing in their original form, numerous sculptures are associated with the site. Many now reside in museums in Rajasthan and around the world; many also feature musicians and dancers. This frieze may depict the divine couple's wedding procession,

or it may reference the many offerings of music and dance that occurred at the temple. Dance—in joy, celebration, glorification, and devotion—was a prominent theme in the sculptures of Harshagiri.

Fragment of a Canopy with Celestial Dancers and Musicians

circa 1800–1830

India; probably Andhra Pradesh

cotton, mordant- and resist-dyed, with painting
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Museum
purchase with additional funding from Betty N.
Alberts and Alexander Johnson
2011.2

In this fragment of a larger textile—likely used as a canopy covering for a Hindu shrine—winged female and male dancers are positioned in a repeated lobed medallion pattern. The hand-drawn figures hold a range of attributes that resonate with both the divine and earthly realms, including fly whisks, drums, cymbals, trumpets, and staffs. The dress and jeweled adornments of each mythical being are carefully drawn and colored, adding detail and depth to the overall repeating pattern. When positioned above a shrine, the dancers connect the two realms, their lively depictions heralding and celebrating the gods worshiped below.

Dancer and Musicians

circa 973

India; Rajasthan, Harshagiri

sandstone

Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund
1969.34

A female dancer, with an elongated torso and angular limbs, is at the center of eight musicians in similarly animated poses. From left to right, the musicians play the cymbals, metal rings, a bamboo flute, two types of drums, and a lute; the last two instruments are unidentifiable. Music and dance are integral parts of divine ritual, where gods would watch celestial dancers and dance themselves. The tenth-century Rajasthani temple site of Harshagiri abounds with sculptural reliefs portraying divine and celestial figures engaged in music making and dance.

An important inscription found at the site, dated 973, describes the beauty of the temple buildings and celebrates the architect, the ascetic who commissioned the project, and the ruling Chahamana family who controlled the land. Their shared devotion to Shiva is expressed through this

inscription and the multiple musicians and dancers paying joyous homage to their god across the temple walls.

Pillar Fragment with Celestial Dancers

circa 1180–1220

Cambodia; former kingdom of Angkor

sandstone

Metropolitan Museum of Art,

Fletcher Fund

36.96.2

Frieze with Celestial Dancers

circa 1180–1220

Cambodia; former kingdom of Angkor, Bayon Temple

sandstone

Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H.

Wade Fund

1938.433

Representations of more than six thousand female dancers decorate the walls, corridors, and columns of the Bayon, the state temple of the great Angkorian king Jayavarman VII. They have often been called *apsarases*—beautiful celestial dancers

who entertain the gods. Some reliefs at the Bayon Temple show pairs of dancers performing in a palace pavilion accompanied by a musician. Others, like the dancers on the pillar fragment here, dance on lotuses. This suggests that though they look like dancers in the palace pavilion, they exist in a different realm.

Bayon-period inscriptions speak of the pious donation of large numbers of female dancers to temples, so presumably, on days of rituals and ceremonies, the temples came alive with music and dancing. The question does arise as to whether the dancers sculpted in relief on temple walls represent celestial dancers or human dancers playing the role of celestial dancers.

Raja Prithvi Singh of Orchha Watching a Performance of Krishna's Dance with Cowherd Women

circa 1750

India; Madhya Pradesh, former kingdom of Datia

opaque watercolors on paper
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,
Gift of Gursharan and Elvira Sidhu
1991.245

Raja Prithvi Singh (r. 1735–1752) stands with his hands in a gesture of reverence as he watches a traveling group of dancers. Taking place in a courtyard setting, the scene depicted is likely the circular dance of divine love, where Krishna frolics in the forest with cowherd women, multiplying himself so that he can simultaneously dance with all present.

While many elements in this painting are only lightly colored, Krishna is portrayed wearing a resplendent peacock-feather crown, long flower garland, and many jewels. Draped over his crown are what appear to be gold-threaded scarves, which would shift and move with the performer's steps.

The raja—also richly painted in patterned textiles, flower garland, jewels, and sword—is portrayed here at a larger scale, which could speak to both his physical stature and royal position. Raja Prithvi Singh may have commissioned this painting, and the performance, to publicly reflect his pious nature and adoration of Krishna.

Maharana Jagat Singh II and Nobles Watching the Rasalila Dance Drama

circa 1736–1740

India; Rajasthan, Udaipur, former kingdom of Mewar

opaque watercolors and gold on paper

Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Museum purchase
funded by Mr. A. Soudavar and the Agnes Cullen
Arnold Endowment Fund

89.334

Depicted three times, an actor dressed as Brahma wears a yellow cloth, a gold cloak, and a four-faced mask. The god is seen conversing with the cowherd women, dancing while holding a red staff and gold ewer, and clasping the hand of the maharana's infant son. The painting may be an enactment of when Brahma makes a congratulatory visit to Nanda and Yashoda, to celebrate the birth of their foster child, Krishna. The parents honor the god and offer every sort of gift, but Brahma accepts only a piece of yellow cloth the baby had once been wrapped in.

This painting and the comparable work positioned nearby come from a series of at least ten, each depicting a different dance event. Some are recognizable as particular episodes from Krishna's life; others portray the gods dancing exuberantly. In each, lamps flicker, the moon is full, and the maharana is seated smoking a hookah.

Maharana Jagat Singh II Watching the RasaLila Dance Drama

circa 1736–1740

India; Rajasthan, Udaipur, former kingdom of Mewar

opaque watercolors and gold on paper

Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Purchased with funds provided by The Broad Art Foundation, Carrie and Stuart Ketchum, Nancy and Dick Riordan, the Marc and Eva Stern Foundation, and Suzanne Stern Gilison and Steven Gilison through the 2006 Collectors Committee

M.2006.78

In this painting, the god Krishna and Radha are seen together three times: standing among the cowherd women, distinguished by a gold textile held aloft over their heads, and holding hands as they enact a whirling dance. The movement of their skirts and shawls animates their forms, in contrast to the other performers that crowd the space.

This painting, and the work positioned nearby, are part of a series that record a *rasalila* performance, the circular dance of divine love, which occurred

in 1736. While a performance of the rasalila could last anywhere from an extended evening to thirty days, little is known of the duration of this event. Pictorial differences from painting to painting—for example, among the dancers, musicians, and the animated figures that populate the lower levels of the palace and immediately beyond the gates—hint at the passage of time and the evocative nature of the performance.

Female Dancer

circa 1075–1125

Vietnam; former kingdoms of Champa,
Binh Dinh province (Thu Thien Temples)

sandstone

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,
Gift of Christensen Fund
BL77S3

This figure and its paired partner (not seen here) were originally installed, together with other sculptures, flanking the main image in a temple built some nine hundred years ago by the people of Cham in today's Vietnam. The central figure that they surrounded is likely to have been a Buddha image found nearby, but it may have been another figure—even a Hindu rather than Buddhist one—that once held pride of place. As numerous sculptural depictions suggest, dance seems to have been part of Cham festivities and religious ceremonies. This figure's splayed knee pose was and is common in artistic representations of South and Southeast Asian dance, as well as in current dance practices.

While there have been attempts to interpret the vocabulary of ancient Cham performance, no traditions survive. In recent decades, re-created dances for shows at hotels and historic sites intersperse poses from artworks with movements more familiar to modern audiences.

Attributed to **Bhima, Kesu Ram, Bhopa, and Nathu** (Indian)

**Maharana Ari Singh with his Courtiers
Being Entertained at the Jagniwas
Water Palace**

1767

India; Rajasthan, Udaipur, former kingdom of Mewar

ink, opaque watercolors, and gold on paper
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Mr. and Mrs.
Herbert Irving, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Ochs Sulzberger,
and Mr. and Mrs. Henry A. Grunwald, gifts in honor
of Mr. and Mrs. Gustavo Cisneros

1994.116

Udaipur paintings that record dance are often situated within a grand architectural setting. This perspective incorporates dance into the larger, often performative nature of court life. Here, a large troupe of dancers crowd a checkerboard courtyard while Maharana Ari Singh is seen twice: seated formally with his retinue of noblemen, and alone—watching the performance through a cusped

archway. Full of movement, the dancers move or sit in small groupings, with several clutching daggers in their hands, perhaps to symbolize the importance of weaponry in the life and culture of Mewar.

Another set of dancers in this crowded performance space form a circle around a couple. Circle dances are associated with several annual festivals, including Krishna's *rasalila* (dance of delight) and the dance in celebration of Shiva and Parvati at the Gangaur festival.

Shepherd & Robertson,
probably Charles Shepherd
(British; active 1850s—approx. 1878)

above

Nautch Performance
circa 1862

India; Delhi

albumen silver print
Collection of Catherine Glynn Benkaim
and Barbara Timmer

below

A Nautch in a Delhi Courtyard
circa 1862

India; Delhi

albumen silver print
Collection of Catherine Glynn Benkaim
and Barbara Timmer

These two photographs depict a performance that took place in a palatial residence in Delhi in the years around 1860. They capture moments from separate passages of dance, but in both, a single dancer is seen on a courtyard terrace overlaid with textiles. Although nearly surrounded by their audience, the performers address them-selves to the arched colonnade at the right of the frame, where the head of household or other honorees are presumably seated.

These photographs are remarkable for the impression of witness they provide. Compared to more familiar, often more overtly Orientalizing images of dancers who are clearly posed by or for European photographers, they offer foreign viewers the pleasure of imagining themselves present at a dance in the context of its "real" performance in India. And yet, there are caveats to the idea of authenticity. Charles Shepherd's prestige, social connections, and role as a photographer may have influenced the event.

Maharana Amar Singh II, Prince Sangram Singh, and Courtiers Watch a Performance

circa 1705–1708

India; Rajasthan, Udaipur, former kingdom of Mewar

ink, opaque watercolors, and gold on paper
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mr.
and Mrs. Carl Bimel Jr.

1996.357

Acrobatic performances were closely related to dance and the theater arts at the Rajasthani courts. Here, a female acrobat balances atop a pole with male musicians below. Dancing and embracing couples are scattered across the horizontal painted space. The open and expansive field of performers engage in unrestrained behavior that alludes to intoxication, merriment, and a freedom of expression. This is incongruously joined by the formal presentation of Maharana Amar Singh, his son, and retinue within an enclosed columned space. Their formal presentation asserts authority in a composition that otherwise dismantles expected court etiquette.

When confronted with quirky and unexpected compositions that represent dance—paintings that disrupt dominant visual languages—one must consider the intersection of patronage, artistic agency, and authenticity of record. Did Amar Singh bear witness to such an event? Or did the artist take liberties when painting a performance?

Dancers at a Rajput Court Performing During the Gangaur Festival

circa 1870–1880

India; Rajasthan

gelatin silver print

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Stephen E.
Hamilton

2014.757

Depicting an observance of the festival of Gangaur at a fiefdom in Rajasthan, this photograph gives insight into dance as a festival practice and a performed symbol. Gangaur is a celebration of the union of Gauri (Parvati) and Shiva, which centers on a circle dance, procession, and other rituals primarily conducted by women. Here, women encircle a figure of Gauri set on a European-style table within a courtyard. Behind them sits the head of the fiefdom, marked by his raised cushion and royal accoutrements.

Perhaps surprisingly, the central element of the image—a dance—appears completely static. One explanation is that the photographer required

stillness during the exposure of the photograph. Another, given the picture's careful arrangement, may indicate that it does not capture an actual dance, but a tableau staged as a symbol of the nobleman's position and elaborate court protocol.

Raja Tedhi Singh of Kulu Entertained by Dancers and Musicians

circa 1750

India; Himachal Pradesh, former kingdom of Kulu

opaque watercolors and gold on paper

From the Catherine Glynn Benkaim and Ralph

Benkaim Collection, made possible by the

generosity of Catherine Glynn Benkaim and Barbara

Timmer and by Museum Purchase: Alice Bimel

Endowment for Asian Art

2020.7

Maharaja Tedhi Singh (r. 1742–1767) is seated before a troupe of dancers and musicians, perhaps on their arrival to the small hill court of Kulu.

Hosting a traveling troupe was a demonstration of the ruler's cultured status and wealth, and this painting can be read through a series of visual cues that position the maharaja—seated on an ornate throne, bejeweled, and with a falcon perched on his gloved hand (a reference to the hunt)—as a sophisticated ruler.

In the foreground, two female dancers rhythmically

sway to the drummer's beat, one with hands clasped in a respectful greeting. The significantly smaller forms of the female dancers may indicate their status as both women and visitors at the court, or it may reference their youth. Itinerant dancing troupes in north India often employed young performers, dedicated to their art since early childhood.

Mythical Bird-Man (kinnara) Dancing

circa 1857–1885

Myanmar (Burma)

wood with lacquer, gold leaf, and inlaid glass
Burma Art Collection at Northern Illinois University,
Gift of Konrad and Sarah Bekker
BC87.01.01

Half-human, half-bird kinnara (males) and kinnari (females) often appear dancing in the visual, performing, and literary arts of many Southeast Asian cultures. Here, the bird-man's position accentuates the pair of bands hanging from his shoulders and clasped together at the chest, a component of Burmese royal finery. Both the male and female figure (positioned nearby) gesture in a way that recalls the kinnara-and-kinnari dances of Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar. These couples are famed for their loving devotion, and, in one famous instance, a kinnari and human prince fall in love, are separated, and must struggle to be reunited.



Scan the code to view a video clip that interprets the movements and meanings suggested by this artwork.

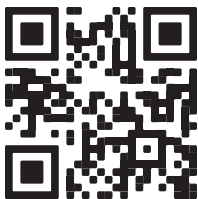
Mythical Bird-Woman (kinnari) Dancing

circa 1857–1885

Myanmar (Burma)

wood with lacquer, gold leaf, and inlaid glass
Burma Art Collection at Northern Illinois University,
Gift of Konrad and Sarah Bekker
BC87.01.02

Within the visual, literary, and performing arts traditions of many Southeast Asian cultures are love stories that include the half-human, half-bird kinnara (males) and kinnari (females). One such love story is the subject of a jataka, a tale concerning one of the Buddha's previous lives and explores an instance when a kinnari and a human prince fall in love. In the story, Prince Sudhana is a precursor of the Buddha, and the kinnari is Manohara or Manora, a princess of the bird-folk kingdom. The tale narrates their separation, trials, and reunion. The jataka ends with the moral lesson that avoiding foolish behavior will allow all of us to be united (or reunited) with those dear to us.



Scan the code to view a video clip that interprets the movements and meanings suggested by this artwork.

Attributed to Dharam Das

(Indian, active approx. 1580–1605)

**Circumcision Ceremony for Akbar's sons,
from an Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl**

circa 1602–1603

India, Mughal period (1526–1857)

opaque watercolors, ink, and gold on paper
Cleveland Museum of Art: Andrew R. and Martha
Holden Jennings Fund
1971.76

This page, from the official chronicles of the Mughal emperor Akbar (the Akbarnama), documents an important event: a celebration to honor the circumcision of Akbar's three sons, the princes Salim (future emperor Jahangir, b. 1569), Murad (b. 1570), and Daniyal (b. 1572). Here, we see the festivities in the emperor's public space, with Akbar seated on his throne, receiving courtiers. The event marked dynastic continuity and imperial power in a public display of grandeur. The painter (or painters) portray what must have been a momentous celebration for Akbar, commemorating

the survival of three sons past the dangers of infant mortality to which his previous children had succumbed. Court officials distribute gold coins to the poor and sick, while the musicians, singers, and dancers denote the joyous festivities.

Grotesque Dancers Performing

circa 1600

India, Mughal period (1526–1857)

gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper

Cleveland Museum of Art, Andrew R. and Martha

Holden Jennings Fund

1971.88

Three oddly attired dancers perform for a royal patron. The male dancers combine features and accoutrements of yogis (ash-covered bodies and tiger-skin wraps) and demons (elephant ears and fiery eyes). This trio and their musicians are probably a troupe of *bhands*, a community of male performers praised for their singing, playing music, and dancing skills. Bhand repertoire included mimicking men and animals and seductive dancing by young men dressed as women.

Without textual evidence, it is unclear whether this painting documents a specific event. While most courtiers are focused on the emperor, Akbar has locked his gaze and gesture onto the elephant-eared dancer. The picture may instead function as an image of ideal kingship. It draws upon visual and

literary descriptions of the powerful prophet-king Solomon's court, where he commanded demons, communicated with animals, and with wisdom and justice, maintained universal peace.

Ayisha Abraham (Indian, b. 1963)

I Saw a God Dance II

2012

digital video with 8mm found footage, 6:47 min.

Lent by the artist

Across a three-part screen of moving images are disparate fragments of found footage that explore the complex character of the Burmese and Indian dancer Ram Gopal (1912–2003). He is seen dancing on a sunbaked rooftop in Bengaluru (Bangalore); applying stage makeup before a performance; and speaking to a rapt audience about the transformative nature of his dance practice. Ayisha Abraham, an experimental artist who often works with found footage, approached this project with a singular question in mind: Who was this stunning man?

Ram Gopal's influential dance practice profoundly influenced the ways many South and Southeast Asian dance forms were received in Europe and the United States in the early twentieth century. Gopal challenged the Orientalized interpretative

dance then popular, which was based on fabricated imaginings of “the other.” Instead, his training in several dance forms (including kathakali, kathak, and Bharatanatyam), carefully choreographed performances, and authoritative self-presentation propelled him to world recognition.

A Ruler and His Court Watching a Dancer

1800–1900

India; Delhi

ink on paper

Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum,
Gift of Philip Hofer

1984.531

Dancers and musicians, the patronage of whom served to authenticate status and glorify the ruler, were central to court performance and entertainment, or *nautch*. A *nautch* could be defined as a performance of dance, music, narrative, or poetry, often in a court setting and for invited guests. These were intricately choreographed events that adhered to court protocol, where each performer or spectator played a significant role. The portrayal of *nautch* often shows the patron in a position of power, while complex social dynamics are also communicated. Here, the ruler is clearly enthroned. Behind him stands an attendant carrying a fly whisk and a sword, symbolic of royal status and martial power. The courtiers and guests are carefully arranged below and on either of the sole dancer.

This use of space centers the dancer and, to a lesser extent, the musicians in the foreground through the placement of the courtier's swords.

Maharaja Sher Singh and Companions Watching a Dance Performance

circa 1850

Pakistan; Lahore

opaque watercolors and gold on paper

San Diego Museum of Art,

Edwin Binney 3rd Collection

1990.1348

Rulers from all parts of South and Southeast Asia and a variety of religious and cultural traditions (here Sikh) watched—and apparently wanted to be seen watching—dance performances. In this painting, three energetic female performers entertain the maharaja and a crowd of male courtiers and visitors. Male musicians accompany them, playing bowed and plucked stringed instruments, drums, small hand cymbals, and wooden clappers.

The exact occasion of this performance is unknown. The enthroned maharaja, Sher Singh, reigned briefly in the early 1840s over the Sikh kingdom centered on the Punjab region of today's Pakistan

and India before being killed in a power struggle. The painting is thought to have been made a few years later, but even so, the artist has included vivid details, remembered or imagined. Some audience members pay attention to the dancing, many observe the maharaja, and a few chat with their neighbors or stare into space.

above

Probably Johnston & Hoffmann (active
Calcutta, approx. 1880–1950)

Nautch Girl

circa 1880

India; probably Kolkata (Calcutta)

albumen silver print

Collection of Catherine Glynn Benkaim
and Barbara Timmer

This photograph raises questions about the interplay between pose and costume. Most notably, is the dancer's display of her fine muslin vestments a gesture from living dance? Or a posture formulated for the camera? The photographic record suggests the gesture of skirt display in depictions of Indian dancers developed in dialogue with the photographic representation of India for European audiences. Often, the gesture is performed by dancers in a direct exchange with the camera, carrying connotations of allure, objectification, and availability.

The relationships of power inherent in photographic

representation, gender, and colonialism make a compelling argument that photographers implicitly or explicitly imposed the gesture. However, there is also reason to hold space for dancers' agency.

below

**Attributed to Fritz Kapp
& Co.** (German, active Kolkata (Calcutta))

Dancing Girl (Nautch) with Musicians
circa late 1880s

India; probably Kolkata (Calcutta)

albumen silver print
Collection of Catherine Glynn Benkaim
and Barbara Timmer

This image exemplifies a common visual strategy and is similar to a series of ethnic and occupational types made by the photo-graphic partnership Shepherd & Robertson in the early 1860s.

The troupe is isolated in a controlled setting and arranged so that each of its elements is open to examination. The image is informative; it offers

a clear view of costumes, implements, and the relation of both to bodies. That comparison helps illuminate the limitations of photographs as historical documents. Yet, while photographs are inevitably biased, they are also complicated. One can imagine the photographer directing the dancer to hold a pose signaling her vocation for the camera. It is possible that—even within an exchange that reduces this dancer to a categorical example—her body is speaking in its own language.

Shepherd & Robertson

(British, active 1862–1863)

Nautch with Three Dancers

circa 1862

India; Delhi

albumen silver print

Collection of Catherine Glynn Benkaim
and Barbara Timmer

In posed photographs like this one, dance and ideas about dance are explored through costume, attributes, and physical attitudes. This photograph, and others like it, were made in the courtyard of a palatial residence, likely with a performance occurring nearby. Yet, rather than capturing dance, it features subjects who were clearly engaged to serve as photographic models. Here, the photographer—probably Charles Shepherd (British, active 1850s–circa 1880)—used deft framing to reduce the courtyard’s architecture to an atmospheric, perfectly balanced backdrop for three figures. The dancers’ postures create a pleasing compositional interplay for the lens.

However, it is unclear whether their poses were adopted from living dance or invented by, or for, the photographer. If invented to create a satisfying photograph, what mixture of training and muscle memory, aesthetic activity, and imagination ought we to read from the final image?

**“Hindu Nautch,” Performers Portraying
Krishna, Balarama, and the Cowherd
Women Dancing in a Courtyard**
Page from the Louisa Parlby Album
circa 1795–1803

India; West Bengal, Murshidabad

watercolors on paper

Alice Bimel Endowment for Asian Art
2021.12

This genre scene encapsulates the European fondness for images of Indian festivities and events. A dance troupe is in the center of a large audience, seated in a semicircle around the performance space. The two principal dancers are dressed as the gods Krishna and Balarama, the others as a male devotee, and four cowherd women.

In the eighteenth century, Bengali artists had begun painting in this European-inflected style, having found patronage from the officers and family of the East India Company. These European patrons—such as Louisa Parlby (d. 1808)—were acquiring individual watercolor scenes of Hindu and Muslim

festivities, topographical scenes, and architectural vistas to incorporate into albums or portfolios.

A prolific commercial art market with high demand from these patrons meant stock scenes were often reproduced. This painting is not representative of an event witnessed by Parlby, but of an experience she deemed reminiscent of her time in India.

Nautch Dancers and Whirling Dervishes, S. H. Barrett & Co's: New United Monster Rail-road Shows

Printed by **Strobridge Lithographing
Company, Cincinnati**
1882

poster

Gift of the Strobridge Lithographing Company
1965.684.27

Representations of distant countries and cultures were often conflated under the big-top tent of the "Oriental" circus. In this poster, artists from the Strobridge Lithographing Company (1867–1960) illustrated a group of *nautch* dancers and "whirling dervishes." The costumes worn by the female dancers are not representative of north Indian styles of the time but are, instead, exoticized creations, presumably meant to entice a Euro-American audience.

This advertisement and the performative elements it portrays have more in common with the aesthetics

of an Orientalized style of dance popular in Europe and America at the time, as opposed to the movement-based traditions prevalent in India and the wider region. Circus proprietors capitalized on their audiences having little first-hand knowledge of the region and sold an alluring and sexually charged fantasy of foreign lands. Perhaps S.H. Barrett & Co's oriental circus was less concerned with technique and accuracy than they were with spectacle.

Designed by David Klein
(American, 1918–2005)

Fly TWA, The Orient
1955
poster

Gift from Sanjay Kapoor in loving memory of his father Vineet Kapoor and grandmother Urmil Kapoor
2020.197

Travel posters were key elements in promoting the burgeoning air travel industry, and David Klein, an American artist known for his influential work in advertising, produced dozens of images for Trans World Airlines. This poster, part of an extensive series to promote tourist travel in the late 1950s and early 1960s, suggests the allure and mystique of destinations in the "Orient." Creating iconic representations, these posters were often fraught with stereotypes or charged with sexual imagery that objectified and exoticized the countries presented. Here, dance—already emblematic of India by this time—is conflated with multiple religious and cultural identities for a global stage. The image of a South Indian bronze Krishna is

situated against a compilation of architectural and natural landmarks that visually reference South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Himalayas. Such illustrations play on the intrigue of the unknown, luring prospective adventurers to the region through majestic buildings, stunning landscapes, and cultural performances.

Joseph Henri-Ponchin (French, 1897–1962)

**Cambodge, Pnompenh,
l'Indochine Française**
1931

poster

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco,
Gift of Kenneth G. High Jr.

1992.99.1

Cambodian classical dance and dancers had fascinated the French since the Cambodian royal troupe performed in France in 1906. Cambodian dance seems to have appealed for its restrained sensuousness, exoticism, and no doubt for some, its reminders of the glories of French colonialism. The French established a protectorate over Cambodia in 1867.

This poster portrays a collection of evocative motifs: the peaked and curving silhouettes of Cambodian temple and palace buildings, a royal figure riding enthroned on an elephant, and, front and center, an image of a classical dancer costumed as a mythical bird-woman, a *kinnari*. Issued the same

year as the Exposition coloniale internationale, a major exhibition in Paris that featured a Cambodian pavilion and a replica of Angkor Wat, this poster—and the Exposition—display carefully chosen aspects of French over-seas conquests, likely to solidify approval for France's colonial efforts.

Dancer Accompanied by Musicians

circa 1150

India; Karnataka

stone (chlorite schist)

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,
Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund
82.207

Intricately and dramatically carved, bracket figures like this one appear under the interior and exterior eave cornices of temples. Projecting outward from the upper portion of a column, the figures are symbolically in attendance at the events occurring below. They are most often carved in the form of beautiful women dancing, playing an instrument, or at their toilette. This dancing figure, accompanied by two musicians, is richly attired in heavy jewelry, including large anklets that would add sound to her movements.

Ceremonies and Festivities of the Burmese Royal Court

circa 1875–1900

Myanmar (Burma); Mandalay

opaque watercolors, gold, and silver on paper

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,

Museum purchase

2016.172

This manuscript illustrates a variety of royal public activities, such as departing on a royal barge procession, receiving a sacred white elephant, and watching war elephants in combat drills. The scene shown here is said to depict the royal plowing ceremony. In this variation, the ground was prepared at the beginning of the agricultural season, and rice seedlings were planted by the king or his representative to ensure a bountiful crop. To the far right, male dancers in the elaborate costumes of Burmese royals are accompanied by the drum circles, pot-gong circles, and other instruments of a classical ensemble. Court ladies in an ornate pavilion watch the proceedings. It is not always clear how the dance performances were

linked to the main activity other than adding to the festive atmosphere and demonstrating the king's ability to sponsor a dance troupe.

Celebration

While dance is rarely an uncomplicated expression, there are instances where exuberance and joy prevail. In these moments, motives such as power, hierarchy, ego, fear, devotion, and more may still be evident, but the present instant—one of movement, music, experience, and connection—is at the forefront and can be considered the dominant element. Ganesha dances with abandon, in emulation of Shiva, often alongside his ganas (attendants), but also with great wisdom communicated in every step. The boy Krishna clutches a butterball and dances joyously before his mother. His energetic, youthful nature is reflected through his reaching limbs as he is depicted mid-step, even as his position as a god is conveyed through the same dance.

Paintings and decorative arts depicting isolated dancing figures, often female, explore how divine love, romance, music, poetry, literature, and dance can meld into one expression. These objects underline how dance is infinitely recognizable—and infinitely linked. Music, dance, and drama permeate all forms of cultural and artistic expressions. This visceral connection

between exuberance and dance is echoed in many disparate artworks showing gods or human beings dancing. Depicted with and for various motives, from sparking romance and seduction to celebrating weddings and other rites of passage, these figures are dancing first and foremost.

The Boy Krishna Holding a Stolen Butter Ball and Dancing

circa 1600–1700

southern India

bronze

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,
The Avery Brundage Collection

B60B192

The Boy Krishna Dancing

circa 1500–1600

southern India

bronze

Lent by a New York collector

A mischievous young Krishna often dances in impish glee, stealing not only treats but also the adoring affections of all who encounter him. The small bronze sculpture positioned nearby depicts the moment Krishna is caught stealing a tasty butter ball by a young neighbor woman in their cowherd village. To pardon himself, Krishna dances for the woman. She experiences the profound love for this child and for the divine that he embodies, which is the core of Krishna worship, or *bhakti* (self-surrendering devotion).

Here, a much larger image of Krishna lacks the butter ball but shares the same gracefulness and equipoised energy as the other. This statue must have been a significant cult icon, often dressed in clothing and jewelry for religious procession. The holes in its base allowed it to be secured to a chariot and carried through the streets. In both bronze sculptures, Krishna embodies both childhood glee and the profundity of the divine.

A Sikh Wedding Procession

circa 1850–1900

India; Punjab or Pakistan

opaque watercolors on paper

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,

Gift of the Kapany Collection

1998.70

Unlike the mythic wedding procession of the Hindu deity Shiva seen nearby, here we see a real-world wedding of a nineteenth-century Sikh groom. The costumes and turban types make clear that this is a Sikh community event, but wedding processions in the Punjab region are sometimes still similar today. The groom, in formal attire, rides a horse to the wedding site, which may be the bride's home. Relatives and friends, both male and female, attend him, and there is festive music from instruments such as the oboe-like *shehnai* and a variety of drums—some, in this painting, carried by camels. Nearly lost in the crowd are two gesticulating female dancers. They, like the musicians, may be professional performers hired for the occasion. It is unclear whether what is shown is the wedding procession of a historical person who may one day be identified, or a generic scene.

Indira Devi (Indian, b. 1940)

**The Wedding Procession
of Shri Shankar-ji (Shiva)**
1977

India; Bihar, Mithila region

ink and colors on paper

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,

Gift of the Ethnic Arts Foundation

2021.19

The wedding procession of an Indian groom can be a lively affair, but none as spirited as that of the god Shiva—escorted and celebrated by his semidivine followers: the often unruly, sometimes grotesque *ganas* (attendants), who were known for their dancing and music playing.

A revered text, the Shiva Purana, describes the scene: “In the marriage procession of Śiva, Nandin and other leaders of the Gaṇas went surrounded by [ten millions] of Gaṇas...These [Gaṇas]...joined the procession with joy and enthusiasm...O sage, some of them belonged to this terrestrial world, some

came through nether worlds, some came through the sky." (40.25–33)

Here, the artist Indira Devi, from an economically impoverished yet artistically rich region of north-eastern India, allows her imagination to burst forth in the rendering of the outlandish ganas and their wild antics.

Dancing Ganesha

circa 1500–1700

India; Karnataka

copper alloy

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased
with funds provided by Harry and Yvonne Lenart
M.86.126

Here, Ganesha holds one leg high, nearly to knee level of his standing leg. His four arms hold numerous attributes, including a bunch of mangos. Unlike the stone sculptures nearby, this bronze work would have lived inside a temple and was worshiped in place and during festivals, when it would have been carried in processions.

Scattered throughout various Hindu and Buddhist sacred texts are mentions of Ganesha dancing, yet the dance is often described with-out revealing why the elephant-headed god moves. His dance is often interpreted as one of pure joy, danced in emulation of his father, Shiva, but rarely ascribed any cosmic significance. Ganesha's story is closely intertwined with that of Shiva, and their relationship is suitably complex. Does Ganesha dance for Shiva's

approval? To demonstrate his obedience to his father? Or perhaps to amplify the resonance of Shiva's dance?

Twenty-armed Dancing Ganesha

circa 900–1000

India; Madhya Pradesh

sandstone

Art Institute of Chicago, promised gift of James W. and Marilyn Alsdorf 169.1997

Amid a multiplicity of forms, we discern Ganesha, with his elephant head and hefty human body. The god struts in dance, gesturing or brandishing emblems with at least twenty hands.

While twenty-armed Ganeshas are rare, sculptures of Ganesha dancing are common, especially in north India. They occasionally link Ganesha to his father, Shiva, and depict him, as here, as a mighty ascetic wearing a tiger-skin loincloth. Some of the emblems Ganesha holds, such as the snake and crescent moon, are also associated with Shiva, but others, such as the conch shell of Vishnu, suggest links to other deities as well. This image may represent Ganesha as the embodiment of the supreme deity, as he was believed to be in some traditions. The fact that he holds emblems associated with several deities may indeed point to his being considered here the totality of divinity.

Dancing Ganesha

circa 800–900

India; probably Madhya Pradesh

sandstone

Nelson-Atkins Museum, Purchase: William Rockhill
Nelson Trust 70-45

This ten-armed depiction of the god has adoring celestial figures above and musicians and devotees below. Ganesha is swaying gracefully to the drummer's tempo, with one of his left hands resting on his hip in a posture of ease. He stretches a snake in two hands over his head, a pose reminiscent of his father, Shiva, holding the flayed elephant skin aloft in a dance of victory over the elephant demon Gajasura.

Beginning in the eighth century, images of Ganesha, like the one seen here, were carved in niches along the south exterior wall of Hindu temples that were often, but not always, dedicated to Shiva. These images are positioned to be the first major deity encountered in a clockwise procession around the temple. It is a fitting spot for Ganesha, as both the creator and remover of obstacles—a role granted to him by Shiva.

left

Gana (Dwarfish Figure) Dancing

circa 1700–1900

southern India

wood with traces of paint

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,

The Avery Brundage Collection

B60S315

right

Gana (Dwarfish Figure) Playing Trumpet

circa 1700–1900

southern India

wood

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,

The Avery Brundage Collection

B60S316

The great god Shiva is attended by a crew of dwarfish characters known as *ganas*. They have varied physiques and features and are known for their tumultuous energy, whether dancing (as they

frequently do), making music, frolicking, or fighting. Their chief is the elephant-headed god Ganesha (gana + isha = “lord of the ganas”).

Here, one gana seems to be engaged in a war dance, carrying a club, a sword, and a shield in three of his four arms. War dances—as martial arts, preparations for actual battle, or celebrations of victory—are frequently depicted in the visual arts, literature, and performing arts of the Indian cultural sphere. The second gana, also four-armed, cavorts while playing a curved trumpet-like instrument called a *kombu* in Tamil. Panels showing ganas such as these would have been part of a vast processional chariot carrying the image of a major deity through the streets on religious festivals.

Hanging with Celestial Beings Dancing and Playing Music

circa 1650–1675

India; Andhra Pradesh, Machilipatnam

cotton plain-weave, mordant- and resist-dyed,
with painting

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of John Goelet
66.230

Within a border of intricate floral medallions, a celestial performance features female and male musicians keeping tempo for two male dancers. Five of the musicians play frame drums, instruments linked to both courtly and religious music believed to connect earthly and spiritual realms. Beating the drums can invoke the presence of angels, prophets, and saints. Like most of those in attendance, the dancing figures are semidivine winged figures.

The scene draws heavily on Persian imagery, from the small tufts of flowers that create the lush landscape to each figure's dress and polychrome wings. Persian and Islamic influences merge with South Asian court cultures to create a mythological,

religious, and poetic space where this intimate scene transpires. The textile was likely used as a cover for ceremonial gifts; comparable small painted cloths feature figures engaged in other courtly activities, including drinking wine, listening to musicians, romantic dalliance, and hunting.

Plaque Depicting Dancer and Instrumentalist

circa 100–1 BCE

India; Uttar Pradesh

terracotta

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Samuel Eilenberg
Collection, gift of Samuel Eilenberg, 1987

1987.142.376

A female performer dances to the music of a harp-like instrument. It is unclear whether the dance is fast or slow in tempo, swinging widely through the dance area or tending to stay in place. Details may reveal hints: the dancer's feet, elbow, and upraised hand break through the confines of the pavilion she performs in, suggesting movement that is more exuberant than delicate.

While it is unclear whether this dance was for entertainment or part of a ritual or ceremony, the dancer's captured position, with lower legs crossed and one hand raised high, recalls the often-depicted posture of female nature spirits. Such nature spirits are seen, for example, on railings at the Buddhist

sites of Bharhut and Sanchi in central India. Later, the Buddha's mother assumes a similar position in Gandharan reliefs depicting and celebrating the birth of the Buddha-to-be.

A Sword Dance

Page from a dispersed Shah Jahan album
circa 1640

India; possibly Delhi
Mughal period (1526–1857)

ink, opaque watercolors, and gold on paper
Gift of JoLynn M. and Byron W. Gustin
2016.419a

This festive scene depicting a yet-to-be-identified sword dance is set outside a forest dwelling or temporary encampment. Two men sit formally in attendance, perhaps visiting the encampment, while three others drink from small cups. A dancer swings his saber in time to music provided by several musicians in the foreground. When swords are used as props, there is typically only one dancer. The sword with a slightly curved blade likely comes from the Islamic world or South or Central Asia but is otherwise unremarkable as a weapon.

Depictions of sword dances in Mughal India, ubiquitous in imperial celebrations, are often associated with the festivities surrounding the birth

of a male heir. Sword dances are also associated with Rajasthani and Sikh kingdoms, regions with strong connections between martial life and kingship.



Scan the code to view a video clip that interprets the movements and meanings suggested by this artwork.

Celebrations with Music and Dance, from the "Early Bikaner" Bhagavata Purana

circa 1610

India; Rajasthan, former kingdom of Bikaner

opaque watercolors on paper
The Kronos Collections

This unidentified scene captures two figures carrying long sticks as they perform an animated dance. They are accompanied by two musicians, two courtiers, four cattle, and are positioned along the shore of a river or lake. One of the dancers wears a luxurious transparent robe with an embroidered textile belt, a peacock-feather headdress, and a necklace of bells. His dress and demeanor conflate his high social rank with an association with Krishna, who often sports a peacock crown. The second dancing figure also wears a peacock feather headdress and is bare-chested, with large bells around his neck, wrists, and hips. Weapons are not always associated with Krishna; seen here, they append a martial element to this dance as warriors were known to hone the skills needed to respond in battle through dance. Skills such as strength, intuition, and speed are as much a part of dance as they are of war.

left

Comb with Depiction of Dancing Woman

circa 1600–1700

Sri Lanka; former kingdom of Kandy

ivory with traces of pigment

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,

The Avery Brundage Collection

B60M345

Rather than offer a glimpse of eighteenth-century Sri Lankan dance performance, this depiction of a dancer may be more of a stylized emblem. The costume, with elaborate jewelry and a lower garment and scarves of pleated fabric, can be compared to con-temporary painting and decorative objects, as well as to the costumes of today's classical dancers. The wide-legged stance, tilted torso, and stylized hand gestures are also familiar. Dancing was part of the ritual service at temples and shrines of the Kandyan kingdom, and similar postures are still taught today. Through repetition, the depiction of such a dancer may be reminiscent of movement but not necessarily capture a specific performance. Sri Lankan ivory combs were made to ornament the

hairstyles of elite women. They show a wide variety of designs in addition to dancers, such as foliage, mythical animals, and deities. The depiction of a dancer was an appealing motif; it may have also held auspicious meaning.

right

Plaque Depicting Dancer

circa 1600–1700

India; Tamil Nadu, Madurai

ivory

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by The Smart Family Foundation through the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Edgar G. Richards
M.88.66

With hands clasped overhead, a female dancer twists so that her upper and lower body face different directions. Around her fly or perch several birds. Parrots, cranes, and other birds are often associated with lovelorn women and may serve as stand-ins for her beloved, confidant, or messenger. Depictions of a solitary woman yearning for her

lover are often, but not always, associated with Krishna. A scenario might be that Krishna (or a beloved) has left this woman for some diversion. Her longing could then be understood as the existential sorrow of a human soul seeking union. This scenario is often expressed through poetry, literature, and dance.

Plaques like this were presumably attached to elaborate boxes by pegs or other fasteners through holes. The connoisseur-owner of such a box might admire the plaques and be reminded of the dance it evokes.



Scan the code to view a video clip that interprets the movements and meanings suggested by this artwork.

Sarah Choo Jing (Singaporean, b. 1990)

Art of the Rehearsal

2016

three channel panorama video, 2 mins 53 secs
Courtesy of Nijkerk-Bogen Collection

A three-channel video reveals the densely packed, narrow backstreets of Singapore lined with homes and shops and interspersed by nine dancers representing the majority Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities of the city-state. The dancers are dressed in ornate costumes and positioned at ground level and on rooftops, isolated yet integrated into the urban fabric. They start and stop dancing at different musical intervals, each embarking on an intimate performance that, when combined, explores Singapore's cultures and ethnicities through dance.

These intentionally constructed vistas are then stitched into video composites, creating community by visually linking remote endeavors. *Art of the Rehearsal* unites through the rigorous shared mental and physical preparation of performance-based arts.

To further emphasize and ritualize process over final performance, the artist blurs boundaries between space and time by integrating shots of several Singapore neighborhoods and presenting them all at night, brightly lit with the artificial illumination of a cityscape.

**A Nobleman Dancing, Accompanied
by Musicians Personifying the Musical
Mode madhava ragaputra**
circa 1680–1690

India; Himachal Pradesh, former kingdom of Bilaspur

opaque watercolors on paper
The Kronos Collections
2015

An inscription on the reverse identifies the musical mode depicted here as *madhava ragaputra*. Usually, visualizations of this mode show a young prince seated on a decorated throne holding a lotus flower, alongside female attendants. This imagery is designed to elicit the sentiment of sweetness, as in bees drawn to a lotus flower. Here, however, the artist has chosen to position three figures within a green landscape setting. Rather than placing the prince in a static seated posture, the artist has him leaping into the air in a kinetic burst. And instead of grasping a lotus blossom to extend to his female companions, the prince loosely twirls the scarf draped across his shoulders with the same care one would give to a cradled flower stem. Perhaps

the harmonious pairing of dance and music is to be understood as producing the same sweet pleasure that a bee derives from a flower.

Two Women Dancing

circa 1770

India; Rajasthan, former kingdom of Bundi

opaque watercolors on paper

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,

Gift of George Hopper Fitch

1996.10

The image of two women dancing—with hands clasped, eyes locked, knees bent, and bodies starting to turn away from each other while suspended in the air—is often reproduced in Mughal and Rajasthani painting. The striking similarities between depictions include the diaphanous robes, swinging hair, and arm ornaments worn by the dancers. These women are often identified as kathak dancers, likely based on their dress.

Kathak, a style of dance that fused Hindu mythological themes and Islamic culture, gained prominence in north India from the fifteenth century and is often associated with the court setting. Combining the arts of storytelling with dance drama, kathak is a celebratory dance that explores divine love, music, and poetry mainly through

hand, eye, and foot movements and expressions. Producing and circulating images of these dancers likely spoke to the shared and wide-reaching enjoyment of the form—and of the feminine body in motion.

A Boating Party at Night with Dancers and Musicians

circa 1700–1720

India; probably Delhi or Lucknow
Mughal period (1526–1857)

brush drawing on paper with added washes of color
Alice Bimel Endowment for Asian Art
2020.117

Through fluid lines, the artist has captured the intoxicating mood of a joyous ensemble brimming with dancers, musicians, and accompanying spectators. Four boats are clustered together on a river or lake, each with a nobleman or person of importance seated in pride of place. The upper boat features two male musicians dancing to the beat of a drum, while the middle boat has a larger entourage of musicians facing a noble person and his retinue. The visual distinctions of this nobleman, presented under a canopy, speak to the hierarchy ingrained in court culture, even in moments of diversion. The lower boat features two female performers dancing enthusiastically to a troupe of female musicians. This physical separation of female

and male performers may relate to the nuanced categorization of space at the Mughal court that imposed strict parameters of where dance occurred and for whom.

Dionysian Scene with Dancers and Musicians

circa 1–100

Pakistan; Gandharan region

stone (schist)

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund
1913, 13.96.23

Two female dancers move in wild abandon as a drummer and harpist play nearby. What is happening, and why is this merriment shown on a stair riser of an ancient Buddhist monument?

The ancient region of Gandhara in today's Pakistan had long been in touch with the Graeco-Roman world. Themes and motifs from Hellenistic and Roman art were popular and turn up even in Buddhist religious contexts. Ecstatic dance played a significant role in Greek Dionysian worship. Contemporary scholarship notes the possibility that the Greek Dionysus had been reinterpreted in Gandhara as Indra, the heavenly king of the gods. There may be a link between the altered states of consciousness associated with the loss of control

brought on by wine and dance and the concept of heavens in which one could be reincarnated. Spiritual advances may be gained through active mental participation in such dance, as well as through actual dancing.

Attributed to **Pandit Seu** (Indian, 1680–1740)

Dancing Villagers

circa 1730

India; Himachal Pradesh, Guler

opaque watercolors on paper

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, from the
Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, Museum
Associates Purchase

M.77.19.24

Seven men dance with abandon to the tune of four musicians. Arms extended and knees bent, these animated figures are positioned against a red background, with only a hint of the ground below and the horizon line above. Unusual for a painting from the later Indian courts that portrays dance, the figures are devoid of a larger court, performance, or narrative context. Instead, an intensity is created and communicated through each expressive face and writhing form. This is dance without a discernable organized presentation or recognizable postures.

This painting has previously been published as

“Dancing Dervishes,” yet neither title captures its essence—of dancers unabashedly absorbed in movement. The identification as dervishes and a dance linked to Sufi devotional practices likely comes from the elongated sleeve of one dancer. In earlier Persian and then Mughal painting, elongated sleeves symbolized contemplation, transcendence, and intoxication in both physical and spiritual realms.