

SCULPTURE IN INDIA

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Overview Sculpture is a sophisticated and highly regarded art form in India, largely because of its religious content and placement in religious structures. While some iconography is distinctively Hindu, Buddhist or Jain, many features are common to all these religious groups. Moreover, scholars have argued that beneath these iconographic differences, there is an identifiable Indian style defined by plasticity and an earthbound sensuality.

Stone Despite the spirituality often attributed to physical images of the Hindu gods and goddesses, they are seen by most people as representations rather than intrinsically divine. That is, they are stones that must be infused with spirit by specialists. Only when these images are transformed by chants, music and ritual into embodied supernatural powers, do they become the means by which people communicate with gods and goddesses.

Early

Indus Valley The sculpted figures of the Indus Valley civilisation provide very early examples of the so-called Indian style. Their graceful and naturalistic modeling contrast with contemporaneous sculpture in the West. A good example is the famous metal figure of a 'Dancing Girl'

Mauryan A thousand years elapsed before other sculpture of comparable quality was produced, this time the elaborately carved monolithic columns and capitals erected by the Mauryas (322-185 BCE), especially Ashoka. Their highly polished sandstone surfaces, and the historical distance from the Indus Valley figures, has given rise to a debate about the possible origin of this virtuosic art. Persian influence is likely, as is the contribution by indigenous styles, but the extent and nature of these influences remain unknown.

Post-Mauryan After the Mauryas, Buddhist sculpture was used to decorate rock-cut and free-standing stupas, monasteries and halls built over much of the subcontinent from the 2nd c. BCE to the 3rd c. CE. Characteristic iconography includes the lotus flower, water symbols and the gestures and poses of the historical Buddha. Outstanding examples are found in north and central India at Sanchi, Ellora and Ajanta, but perhaps the most spectacular is found in south India at Amaravati, where exquisitely carved figures, often in narrative scenes and in small niches, display a rare skill, dynamism and imagination.

Shift In the early centuries of the Common Era sculpture experienced a shift from symbols and narrative scenes to individual figures. Earlier iconography, consistent with Buddhist ideas of impermanence and the absence of a soul (*anatman*), used aniconic symbols (an empty throne, Bodhi tree, wheel of life) and scenes to represent the Buddha. Now, however, the Buddha began to appear in anthropomorphic form as a powerful presence alongside other figures, such as folk deities and water nymphs.

Gandhara At roughly the same time, another school of Indian sculpture developed in the northwest. The Gandhara school of Greco-Buddhist art is named after the region of Gandhara, where Alexander the Great's invasion left behind Greek influence. Those Greek influences then intermingled with Persian, Scythian, Buddhist and Chinese cultures. Artisans produced large, muscular representations of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas (particularly Maitreya), who resemble Greek figures wearing Roman togas.

Gupta The Gupta Empire (4th-6th c. CE) in north India produced the classical school of Indian sculpture, characterised by supreme plasticity, graceful lines and sensual yet serene surfaces. A good illustration is the red sandstone standing image of the Buddha from Mathura, wearing a diaphanous robe with delicately carved folds. Similar softly moulded figures of the Indian pantheon were the inspiration for Hindu and Buddhist art produced in Southeast Asia, China and Japan. These images, displaying both physical presence and disembodied wisdom, became the ideal for Mahayana Buddhism.

South

Classical About 600 CE a parallel classical school of sculpture emerged in south India. The most spectacular examples are seen on the rock-cut and free-standing temples at Mahabalipuram, on the southeast coast near Madras, which are similar to earlier ones at Ajanta and Ellora. Further developments in stone sculpting of Hindu gods and goddesses are seen on the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, the Pallava capital.

Lost Wax More unique, however, are the bronze sculptures cast during the Chola Empire (9th-13th c. CE) in south India. In the 'lost wax' method, beeswax and camphor are mixed together with oil and kneaded to form the wax original. This model is then coated with clay until the mould is sufficiently thick, after which the model is heated in an oven. When the wax melts and flows out, the hollow clay model remains. Then bronze, an alloy with a large proportion of copper, is heated and poured into the empty mould. When the metal has filled all spaces and cooled, the mould is broken off. Blemishes are removed, the surfaces are smoothed and the image is then 'awakened' by rituals before it can be used.

'Lord of Dance' The resulting bronzes are exquisite and supple representations of the gods and goddesses. Most observers comment on the assured skill, the simple perfection of the bodies, their life-like poses and gestures and yet their other-worldly detachment. One well-known masterpiece is the image of Siva as the 'Lord of the Dance.'

Modern

Civic More popular than fine art sculpture are statues of political and other public figures. A statue of Lord Cornwallis, Governor of Madras, was erected in Fort St. George in 1800. This and the nearly 200 other statues of Europeans (and at least one Indian) put up in the subcontinent in later years were commissioned from artists in Europe, mostly in Britain. Since Independence, however, almost every city and town has public statues created by Indian sculptors. Gandhi is the most common choice, but film stars, legendary heroines and 'heroes of labour' also stand up for public viewing. Without religious inspiration or intention, these sculptures reflect a modern India, looking back to tradition.

Contemporary From the 19th century onward, Indian sculptors came under the influence of European traditions. However, unlike painting, most sculpting traditions were not supplanted but rather supplemented by modern trends. Druva Mistry (b. 1957) is a well-known artist with many projects in major cities of India. On the other hand, the Bombay-born, UK-resident and world-famous artist Anish Kapoor has sited only a few works in his native country.

Reading

Stephen Huyler, *Gifts of Earth: Teracottas and Clay Sculptures of India* (Granta, 1996)

C. Sivaramamurthi, *Indian Sculpture* (Allied, 1982)

Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (Calcutta, 1946)

Walter Spink, *Ajanta: History and Development. 6 Volumes* (Brill, 2005-2008)

George Michell, *Architecture and Art of Southern India* (Cambridge, 1995)

Pratapradya Pal, *Indian Sculpture* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1988)

George Michell, *The Hindu Temple* (Chicago, 1988)

Garry Michael Tartakov, *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery* (OUP Delhi, 2012)

Discussion questions

Analyse the 'Indian style' of sculpture by examining examples from each of the major phases of its history. Is there a consistent set of elements that permit us to speak of an 'Indian style'? Your argument should then be supported by comparing the Indian examples with the sculpture tradition in another civilisation (Roman or Greek would provide the best comparison, but Chinese, Persian or Egyptian would also be useful).

Stone carved images of Hindu gods and goddesses dominate the history of Indian sculpture. Analyse their cultural and religious function, paying attention to their physical context, their patrons and their audiences. Consider also that Hindus, unlike animists, do not believe that the deity resides in the stone; rather, it requires a ritual specialist to invoke the divine.

South Indian bronzes produced during the Chola Empire are considered by many art historians to be among the finest pieces of all Indian art. These bronzes are further admired for the 'lost wax' method used to make them, a method still in use today (by a few specialists). Analyse the history of this art form. Why did it appear in the 9th to 12th centuries CE in the Chola country? How did the artisans learn about and adopt the lost wax method?

Secular sculpture became important during the colonial period, but it also has an older history. Analyse the development of this little-studied aspect of Indian sculpture. What were the early examples? What significance did the better-known colonial statues have? How did Indian secular statues both emulate and differ from contemporaneous colonial ones? What role does public, secular sculpture play in modern India?