



Krishna and the Naked Cowgirls

India (Uttar Pradesh, Garhwal), 1775-1800

Pigments on paper, 8 7/16 x 5 7/8 in (21.5 x 15 cm)

Always the prankster, the young Krishna never misses a chance to tease the women of Vraja. This is perhaps the most daring, if not the most outrageous, of his pranks, but it is also pregnant with profound spiritual meaning. Having spied the cowgirls (gopi) bathing naked in the water, Krishna quietly picks up their clothes and climbs onto a kadamba (Anthocephalous cadamba) tree. The hapless women beg Krishna to give their clothes back, but he compels each to come out of the water naked to receive her garments. In the text, Krishna then tells the women that he was simply teaching them the importance of bathing naked in the water, which is the habitat of the god Varuna, but the preferred symbolic explanation is that the gopi represents the individual mortal soul (atman), which cannot merge with the immortal soul (Brahman) carrying any kind of baggage.

Curiously, in this beautiful picture, the gopis are not naked at all, but only topless. They have their saris tied around their waist sarong-like, which is how women wrap themselves when bathing in a public place. Therefore, what the gopis plead for are their light scarves, although even that has been retained by one lady in the middle of the composition. She is clearly more ashamed than the others, for not only does she cover her head with her scarf but bows towards the water as if wanting to protect herself from Krishna's gaze. The crowned prankster sits calmly on the tree and extends his left arm to offer a garment to a gopi. The waterpots below the tree indicate that it is probably mid-afternoon and that the gopis have come to fetch water, which, however, proves too tempting. They do not realize that their savior is lurking in the bushes.

Thus, it is clear that the artist had considerable latitude to provide nuance to the story, which becomes evident from a comparison with other versions of the incident. This particular picture is close in its composition to three others that have been attributed to Garhwal (Archer 1973, vol. 2, pl. 89.32-33; Aijazuddin 1977, pl. 34.2). However, in all three, as also in an earlier and more elaborate composition from a Kangra workshop, ascribed by Goswamy and Fischer to the first generation after Nainsukh (Randhawa 1963, pl. XI), the gopis are all fully naked and Radha is not so prominently identified, though she is isolated in the center of the composition. If, indeed, the four closely related versions of the theme were painted in a Garhwal workshop, there can be little doubt that the original drawing must have been executed by the same master responsible for the Bhagavatapurana series first published by Randhawa. (For another version of the subject attributed to Kangra, see Spink 2000, pp. 146 - 47, no. 81.)

*Kali*

India (Himachal Pradesh, Kangra), 1800-25

Pigments and gold on paper, 10 5/8 x 7 1/2 in (27 x 19.2 cm)

Within an oval frame, a favorite device of later Pahari artists, tiny figures of male divinities, shown against the pale blue sky, worship the towering figure of the goddess Kali. Unlike the Kali on the battlefield (see no. 54), however, this goddess is a beautiful lady with a perfectly proportioned body and a pleasant face. In fact, she is a dark, naked version of the more decorously attired, fairer damsels of contemporary pictures. She stands on the body of her supine husband Shiva, who has an erection as he stretches out on a lighted funeral pyre in a cremation ground. As is customary in Pahari pictures, he has only two arms, but the crescent moon and the third eye as well as the erect penis (*urdhareta*), are sufficient cognizants. She, on the other hand, has four arms that hold the sword and the severed, bleeding head of a titan on the left and display the gestures of reassurance and charity on the right.

This is, of course, the familiar form of the deity that is still very popular in the eastern parts of India, especially among the Bengali Hindus. Apart from residing in such famous temples as Kalighat in Calcutta and Dakshineswar nearby, she is worshipped in the form of clay images every autumn on Diwali, when the rest of India worships Lakshmi. The legend goes that the uncontrollable Kali was once on the warpath, and only Shiva could stop her, by allowing her to step on him. When she realized that she had insulted her husband, she stuck her tongue out, which is how Indians express shame. However, in scenes of Kali's battle with the Raktavija (no. 54b), the extended tongue indicates her bloodthirstiness.

Apart from the burning pyre, the cremation ground is enlivened by scavenging birds and animals picking flesh off bones. However, the artist was not very familiar with his fauna, which are rendered conceptually rather than realistically. The coloring is in soft, muted tones, with emphasis on whites and grays. The corners beyond the oval frame and within the floral borders are enriched with delicately drawn, intertwined flowering vines on a gold ground.

*Dancing Ganesha*

India (Uttar Pradesh), 9th-10th century

Beige sandstone, 29 1/2 in (74.9 cm)

Published: Ray 1986, pp. 188 and 190-91, fig. 2

Such steles with images of dancing Ganesha are usually placed in niches on the south walls of temples, where they are the first major images that devotees view as they begin their clockwise circumambulation. This placement is appropriate for a divinity who is regarded as the god of beginnings and is to be invoked before undertaking any task. This role has assured Ganesha's popularity with all Hindus, and even the Jains and the Buddhists worship him. Ganesha also has his own small shrines in most large temple complexes, but dancing images of the god are generally meant for external walls.

Clearly, Ganesha dances in imitation of his father Shiva, who is considered to be the supreme teacher of the performing arts as well as the cosmic dancer. Even if profound philosophical import is not attached to Ganesha's dance, certainly he appears to have been a popular figure in the iconographic scheme, especially of Shaiva temples. Both the variety and complexity of his dancing images are also noteworthy compared to the

repertoire of his more celebrated father. Both aesthetically and technically, Ganesha's feat, considering his bulk, is no less laudatory and admirable than Shiva's.

In this perfectly preserved and deeply cut relief, the dancing god is portrayed with eight hands, the two above his head holding a snake like a trophy, mimicking his father's dance of victory, when Shiva upholds the flayed hide of the elephant titan Gajasura in a similar fashion. One almost sees a Freudian touch here as the elephant-headed one (gajanana) upholds the serpent, which is a prominent symbol of his father. Among his other visible attributes are a battleaxe and a trident, both of which he usurps from his father. The lower-left hand holds a bowl of sweets, which he loves to eat, explaining his ample girth. Nimble footed, he dances to the rhythmic sound of two drummers on either side.

A half lotus is carved on the base, and a large lotus halo sets off this head. Much of the stele behind the dancing god has been completely cut away, allowing the viewer to appreciate better the three-dimensional volume and buoyancy of the form, with its multiple arms, bulky body, and elephant's head with large fan-like ears. Indeed, it is his elephantine form and his boyish nature that perhaps make Ganesha's dance an example of cavorting rather than of cosmic activity, although some poets and theological texts extolling his glory do emphasize the latter aspect.

*Kali as the Supreme Deity*

India (Himachal Pradesh, Chamba?)

Ca. 1800

Pigments on paper

6 7/8 x 10 7/8 in (17.4 x 27.6 cm)

This is a remarkable picture in that it not only unambiguously demonstrates the supremacy of the goddess Kali but gives an unusual form of the deity. She is seated on a throne in a flowering green meadow. In the foreground flows the river Ganga, which descends from the hair of Shiva, who forms one leg of the golden throne. Wearing a snake as a necklace, Shiva sits on an elephant skin. The other three legs of the throne are formed by the figures of Vishnu with his usual attributes, the four-headed Brahma, and Indra, with multiple eyes on his body. Thus there is no doubt about who is in control.

The goddess herself shows some unusual features. She is, of course, black like Kali but not beautiful. Her large, pendulous breasts, her distinctive Afro hairdo, the tiny eyes, and the white crescent moon outlining her face distinguish her from standard forms of Kali.

She also wears a yellow dhoti.

However, like Kali she wears a garland of severed heads and has four arms with the same attributes, although they are disposed in the reverse order. The severed head is in the upper right and the sword in the lower, while the upper left hand exhibits the gesture of charity and the lower that of assurance. At first sight, the posture of the goddess seems unusual, but, in fact, it is the classic position for giving birth and is encountered in early Indian art in images of other iconographic forms of goddesses both in India and Nepal (see Pal 1986A, p.141, no. 520, for a first-century B.C. example). It is also the posture in which Kali sometimes straddles Shiva, when he is supposed to be a corpse (sava), the appropriate seat (asana) in heroic (virachara) tantric praxis (Rawson 1971, no. 204).

*Shiva*

India (Tamil Nadu)

ca. 1300

Bronze

21 9/16 in (54.9 cm)

With his tall crown of matted hair adorned by the crescent moon, Shiva is seated here in ease and comfort, with his right leg pendant on a rectangular base or seat. Because the posture is known as sukhasana, or posture of contentment, the image type is called sukhasanamurti. It is likely that his consort, Uma, or Parvati, once sat on a similar seat on his left. Shiva's lower right arm, as usual, displays the gesture of reassurance. The upper right holds the battleaxe, a weapon of destruction, while in the corresponding left hand is the antelope. Apart from representing animal-kind (pasu) - hence his title Pasupati or Lord of Creatures - the antelope also symbolizes illusion (maya), which is destroyed by the battleaxe. The lower

left hand forms the kataka or simhakarna (lion's ear) gesture.

Both the size and the dignified bearing make this a bronze of commanding presence. Not only is the figure handsomely proportioned but the modeling still echoes the simplicity and elegance of the classic Chola-period aesthetic. The body is not enmeshed in ornaments and allows the viewer to admire the fluent contours of the form. However, it should be remembered that such a figure would rarely be seen in a temple in its naked glory. It would be clothed most of the time, either while resting in a shrine or being carried during occasional processions and the devotee would catch only a glimpse of his face.

*Lakshmi*

Nepal

13th Century

Gray schist

16 in (40.6 cm)

At first glance, this lotus-bearing goddess may be confused with the Buddhist Tara, but in reality she represents Lakshmi, the principal spouse of Vishnu. The lotus is a common attribute of both, but the distinctive clue to this figure's identification with Lakshmi is in her position. Originally, this fragmentary sculpture would have formed the right side of a stele. The central figure in such icons is usually Vishnu, with his mount Garuda on the god's left, balancing Lakshmi on the other side (see Pal 1974, figs. 116-18). This is the common Vaishnava triad seen all over the Kathmandu Valley in temples and roadside shrines. Moreover, Tara is seldom represented in stone steles with her male counterpart, Avalokiteshvara, in this fashion.

Of somewhat stocky proportions, the goddess here looks more like a local woman than an idealized model. She stands with a swinging right hip on a lotus and is appropriately attired and ornamented. With her left hand she grasps the prominently meandering stalk of the lotus, while the right hand, extended in the gesture of charity, delicately holds a gem with the index finger and the thumb. Clearly, she is being portrayed here as the dispenser of wealth that she is.

Desire and Devotion

Art from India, Nepal, and Tibet

in the John and Berthe Ford Collection

The word *kama* basically means "desire," and, hence, the *Kamasutra* is a book that helps facilitate the fulfillment of human desires. The essential message of the *Bhagavadgita* is devotion - complete and unconditional devotion to God - as the principal mode of attaining salvation. In order to gain salvation, however, one must first be motivated and, therefore, behind devotion lies the impetus of desire. The urge or the yearning to unite with the divine is no less passionate and intense than the desire of two lovers to unite. Hence, Indian religious thought has always recognized the parallel between sexuality and spirituality.

<http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/desire/index.html#3>