

Indian Art Collection on Display in the J. Watumull Gallery

J. WATUMULL GALLERY

The gods are alive and well in Gallery 13 as we reopen the J. Watumull Indian art gallery on an interim basis. The move across the courtyard has permitted a reorganization of this collection, one which allows us the opportunity to reexamine the relationship between long-time favorites with newly acquired treasures.

Opening directly to the front entrance visitors are greeted to the gallery by the beloved *Krishna Playing the Flute*, a stone sculpture from 12th century India, who beckons with the gentle countenance of a robust young man. This image, a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Christian Aall, is joined by a recently acquired south Indian Chola bronze of *Dancing Krishna* which dates to the early 14th century. The charming god is depicted as a dancing baby balanced perfectly on one muscular leg.

The rest of the Hindu pantheon has been grouped together with the massive stone stele of Shiva and Parvati flanked by their beloved son and the "remover of obstacles" Ganesha. Vishnu, known as "the Protector," is depicted in a formal dark chlorite stone image that radiates confidence and security.

The two other main world religions whose birthplace was India are represented

by a fine selection of Jain and Buddhist Sculpture. Two small personal household shrines of important Jain saints are complemented by the recently acquired sculpture of the near life size image of Maili, the 13th Jain Tirthanka. The Buddhist collection consists of images from Gandhara of both the *Seated Buddha* and the *Standing Bodhisattva* from 2nd century B.C. and 3rd century A.D. India respectively.

The decorative arts of India are dramatically represented by an extensive display of jewelry in gold, diamonds, rubies and precious materials.

Beautiful hair ornaments, necklaces, arm bands, and pendants abundantly demonstrate the superior craftsmanship of the Indian artisan. A number of decorative metal pieces including a large water flask and an elaborately made cloissoné sweet meat dish add to the rich display of fine Indian art. We have also included several beautiful and colorful saris from our textile collection to enliven this gallery.

Eventually the Indian art collection will move into a larger and more fitting gallery space but for now this selection from the permanent collection introduces the arts of Asia through one of Asia's oldest civilizations.

—Julia M. White,
Curator of Asian Art

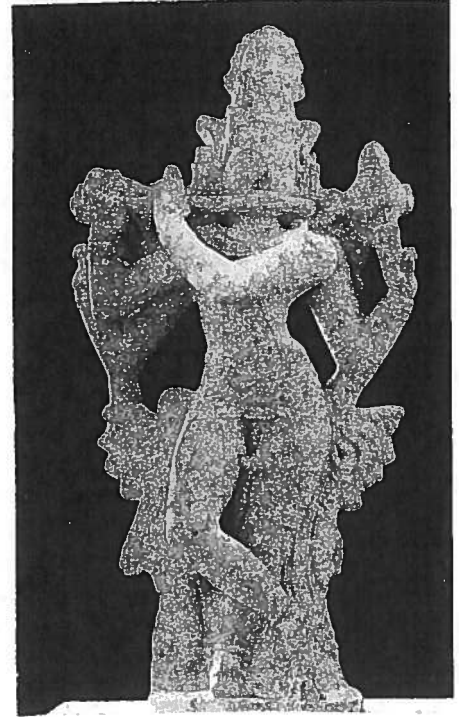
Krishna Playing the Flute
India, 11th-12th century
Stone
H: 39 in.
Gift of Mrs. Christian H. Aull, 1993
(7454.1)



KRISHNA PLAYING THE FLUTE (7454.1)
Tanjore, Kerala, Chola Period 11-12th C.
GRANITE

Gift of Mr & Mrs. Christian Aall, 1993
From an article published in ORIENTATIONS, Dec. 1999

An imposing twelfth century Chola image portrays an adolescent Krishna as a four-armed flute player, who capture the hearts of the gopis. Even though the granite sculpture is depicted in high relief (as was often the case in ancient India) it still relies on a system of structural supports to ensure stability. His ear ornaments and ears are attached to his upper attributes while the flute is made part of his lower jaw and braced by a support coming from his shoulder. His elbows are attached to his side bows with long ribbons flowing down into the pedestal base. A gracefully posed right leg is attached to his other leg, which in turn remains attached to the matrix of the stone block. Such a constructional system dictates a frontal view and leads to minimal interest in the definition of anatomical details at the back.



KRISHNA PLAYING THE FLUTE (7454.1)
Chola period 11-12th C. GRANITE
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Christian Aall - 1993

In addition to being a god-child constantly involved in playing pranks on unsuspecting adults, Krishna is also a cowherd god who is renowned for his flirtatious encounters with the milkmaids (*gopis*).

Originally this sexual element in the worship of Krishna was connected with a fertility cult. However, the relationship of longing from afar between the milkmaids and Krishna could be seen as a metaphor for the union of the soul with the God. This is the case of Rada, the chief of the *gopis* who is the principal object of Krishna's desire

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Krishna is portrayed as a pastoral deity who plays the flute with magical effects.

This tribal rusticity in the personality of Krishna may explain his dark skin colouring as indicative of his non-aryan, tribal past.

This tribal ancestry is also implied in the use of the flute. The pastoral Bhil tribesmen of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh are justly famous for their skill in playing the bamboo flute.

Anonymous

Krishna Playing the Flute

India, Chola dynasty, 11th-12th century

Stone

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Christian H. Aall, 1993

(7454.1)

Indian epics recount that Krishna, an incarnation of the supreme deity Vishnu (here revealed by the conch and wheel held in his upper hands), was born to a princess of a royal family, whose brother had imprisoned her father and usurped the kingdom. Fearing for Krishna's life (as a potential claimant to the throne), his mother entrusted him to adopted parents who took him to the cow-herding village of Vrindavan, where he enjoyed a largely idyllic childhood—periodically interrupted by demon assassins sent by his uncle—until he could come to maturity and restore his grandfather to power.

As a young man of divine beauty and charm, he seduced all of the women of the village, including the already married Radha, who became his favored companion, despite his many other affairs and her resulting jealousy. At the same time, Radha's relationship with Krishna often was used a metaphor for religious devotion to the divine, or *bhakti*.

Kṛishṇa Playing the Flute

India, Tamil Nadu, Chola period, 11-12th century
Stone

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Christian H. Aall, 1993
(7454.1)

Playing the flute and dancing were favorite activities of Kṛishṇa, an incarnation of Viṣṇu. Brought up among pastoral people, Kṛishṇa was beloved by the *gopīs* (milkmaids, who represent the human soul) for whom the sound of his flute was irresistible.