

STELE DEPICTING SHIVA AND PARVATI

Central Indian, ca. 12th century

Pink sandstone; h. 52 in. (132.1 cm.)

Purchase, Jhamandas Watumull Endowment Fund, 1987
(5650.1)

The divine couple, Shiva and Parvati, are seated in postures of ease and loving intimacy on Nandi, Shiva's bull. Shiva's right hands hold a lotus and a trident. One left hand touches the breast of his consort and the other clutches a many-headed cobra. Parvati's right arm embraces Shiva's shoulders, while her left hand holds a mirror, which symbolizes truth. Behind their heads is a shared nimbus. Flanking them are small images of their two sons. At the left is the elder, the elephant-headed auspicious god, Ganesha, who is dancing; at the right is the younger son, Skanda or Kartteyakea, god of war, with his peacock vehicle. Above, on either side, are the other deities of the Hindu trinity, who complement the destructive/regenerative powers of Shiva: to the left, Brahma, the Creator; to the right, Vishnu, the Preserver.

At the pinnacle of the stele are apsarases (celestial beings) holding a garland of flowers symbolizing their sensuous pleasures. The architectural tiers of the framing panels teem with energetic images: warriors grappling with *vyali* (leonine creatures), who stomp on elephants, lesser deities, and attendants. The whole forms the towering peak of Mount Kailasha, abode of the gods.



At the base of the stele, isolated in a cavelike enclosure, is a figure with a sword who has been identified as Ravana, the demonic king of Lanka. Many different legends recount Ravana's schemes to usurp the immortal powers and privileges of the manifestations of the trinity for himself; in some stories he even attempts to capture Mount Kailasha. Eventually he is always thwarted. In this stele, neither Ravana's threatening presence nor the *vyali*'s aggressive energies, not even the provocative merrymaking of the apsarases, disturb the serene and tender mood of Shiva and Parvati's perfect love incarnate. SSD

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Images of Shiva and Parvati are among the most prevalent in all of Indian art and representations of the great god and goddess illustrate all phases of their relationship. In this stele they are "at home" on Mount Kailasa with their sons, Ganesha, the elephant-headed "Remover of Obstacles," shown at lower left holding an axe, and Karttikeya, the war god (lower right), depicted with his vehicle, the peacock.

Parvati and Shiva are seated on Nandi, the bull, Shiva's mount. Parvati, holding a mirror which symbolizes her power, reclines on the god's knee as he lightly caresses her breast. In one of his right hands he holds the trident, his principal weapon.

Flanking the god and goddess are representations of the two other gods in the Hindu trinity: the three-headed Creator, Brahma (left), holding a sword and Vishnu, the Preserver (right), with his mace, discus, and conch shell. Elephants, lionine beasts, and celestial figures are among the inhabitants of the mountain abode. Above are garland-bearing *vidyahas*, "bearers of wisdom," and at the top of the stele is the face of Shiva's protector, Kirttimukha. In a niche below crouches Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, who shakes the foundations of the mountain in an attempt to disrupt this harmonious world. The evil demon is subdued by Shiva, thereby saving the universe from chaos.

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