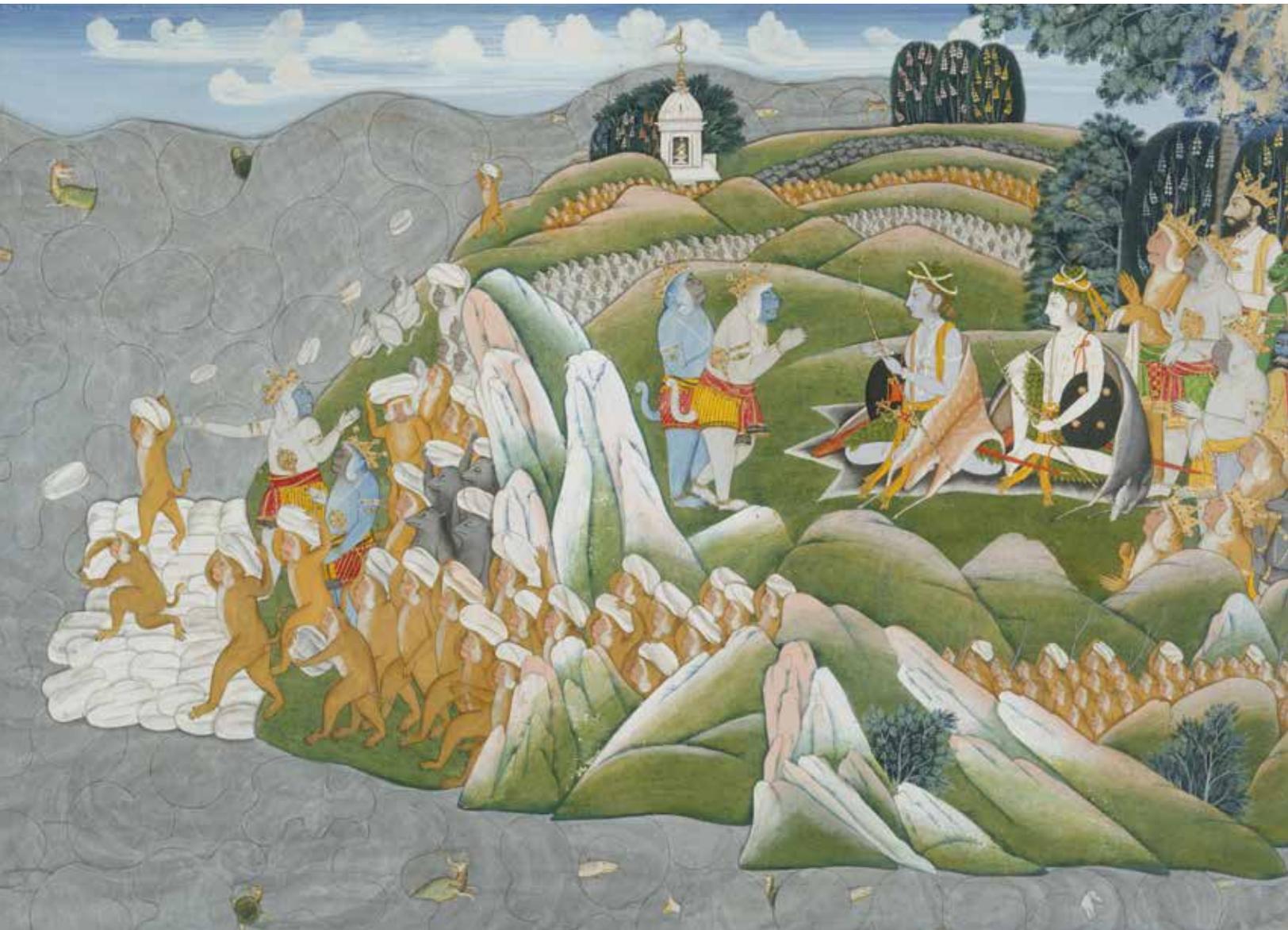


# South Asian Art

A Resource for Classroom Teachers





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# Introduction

The Philadelphia Museum of Art is home to one of the most important collections of South Asian and Himalayan art in the Western Hemisphere. The collection includes sculptures, paintings, textiles, architecture, and decorative arts. It spans over two thousand years and encompasses an area of the world that today includes multiple nations and nearly a third of the planet's population. This vast region has produced thousands of civilizations, birthed major religious traditions, and provided fundamental innovations in the arts and sciences.

This teaching resource highlights eleven works of art that reflect the diverse cultures and religions of South Asia and the extraordinary beauty and variety of artworks produced in the region over the centuries.

We hope that you enjoy exploring these works of art with your students, looking closely together, and talking about responses to what you see. We also invite you and your students to visit the Museum to explore firsthand the beauty and power of South Asian art.

These materials are also available online at [philamuseum.org/education](http://www.philamuseum.org/education).

For a more in-depth look at the objects and themes in the South Asian art collection, as well as the individuals involved in bringing it life, visit <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/634-549.html>.

## What is South Asia?

South Asia describes a region of the world that includes the countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet. This vast area is home to diverse ancient cultures, languages, and religions, which often provide important themes and inspiration for art. Because much of the art from these areas in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art predates the establishment of the countries we know today, we have used the more general designation of "South Asia" to describe the origin of these diverse works of art. For each object, we have also listed, where known, the name of the current country from which the work comes.

# Acknowledgments

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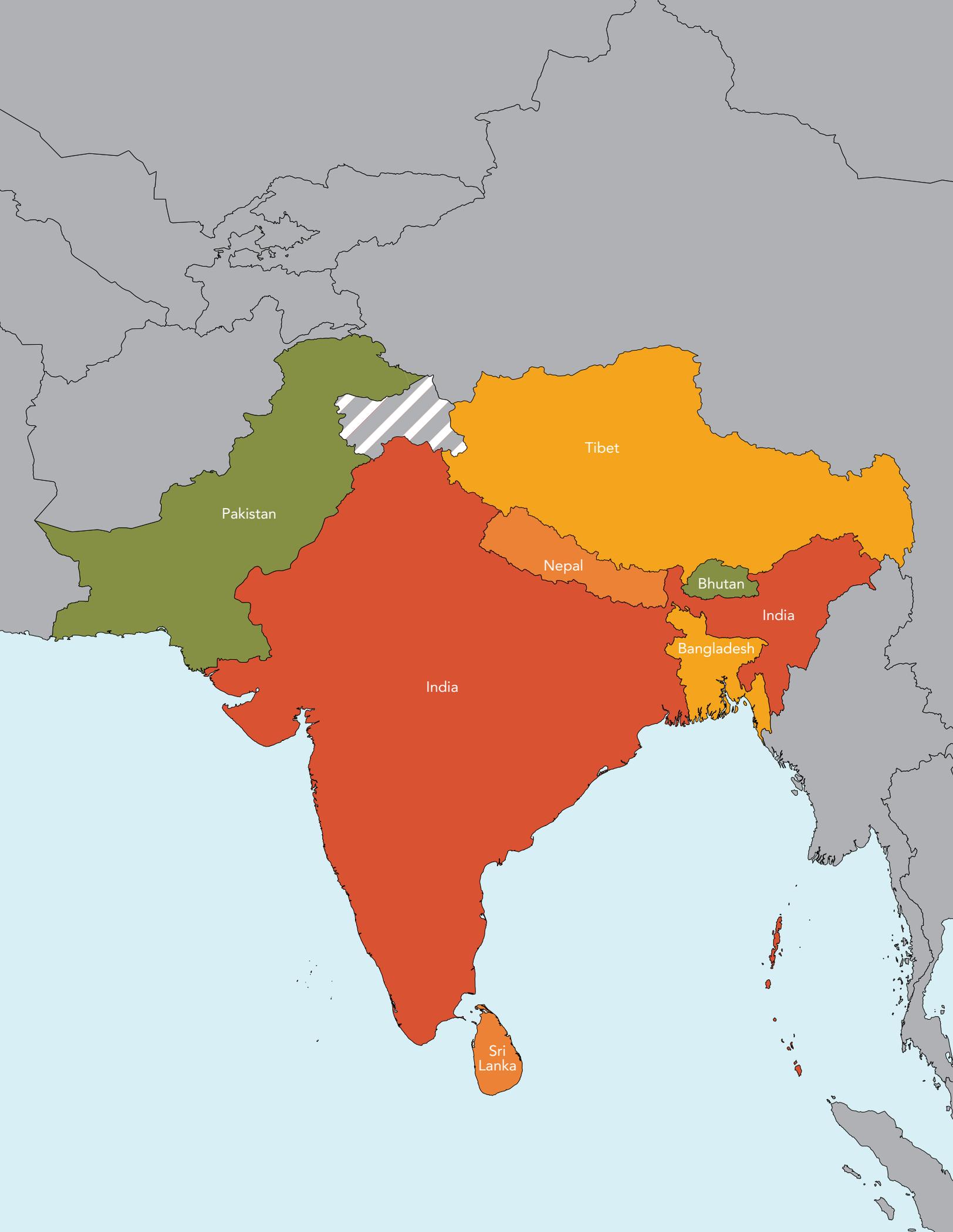
*The reinstallation of the Museum's galleries of South Asian Art was made possible by the Estate of Phyllis T. Ballinger, The Women's Committee of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Institute of Museum and Library Services, The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, William Penn Foundation, Gupta Family Foundation Ujala, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, and The McLean Contributionship. Generous donors to this initiative include Steve and Gretchen Burke, Sailesh and Manidipa Chowdhury, Mr. and Mrs. Donald Kimelman, Mr. and Mrs. Shantanu RoyChowdhury, Pamela and Ajay Raju, the Jones Wajahat Family, Paritosh M. and Srimati Chakrabarti, Drs. Julia A. and Eugene P. Ericksen, Ira Brind and Stacey Spector, Lyn M. Ross, Dennis Alter, Andrea Baldeck M.D., Tushar and Amrita Desai, Shanta Ghosh, David Haas, Dr. Krishna Lahiri, David and Jean Yost, and other generous donors.*

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*Credits as of October 24, 2016*





Pakistan

Tibet

Nepal

Bhutan

India

Bangladesh

India

Sri Lanka

# Religions of South Asia

South Asia is home to a wide variety of religions and religious practices. In this resource we will introduce you to works of art from the traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Jainism. Each of these religious traditions visualizes the divine and relates it to the material world in unique ways. The divine may be found in an object like a sculpture or a tree, in a living being like a holy man, in a sacred text, in an activity, or even in a sound. Gods, saints, and spiritual guides—there are many divine beings depicted in South Asian art. Their role? To accomplish a myriad of things, including creating the universe, saving it from evil, or guiding followers along the path to spiritual enlightenment.

To help in their endeavors, some divinities and spiritual beings take on different forms, while others invoke a power beyond the earthly realm. In most instances, these beings have identifiable physical attributes that artists include when visualizing their form.

## **Buddhism**

Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, a prince who lived around the fifth century BCE in India. He gave up his kingdom to seek spiritual enlightenment and hoped to create a more humane world. He became known as “Buddha,” which means awakened or enlightened one. As Buddhism moved across Asia, it absorbed indigenous beliefs and incorporated a wide range of regional imagery into its art and religious practices. The ultimate aim of Buddhism, like Hinduism and Jainism, is to escape the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth to be released into nirvana. The stories, images, and symbols in Buddhist works of art are designed to instruct and help worshipers to focus on their practice and spiritual goals.

## **Hinduism**

Hinduism is one of the world’s oldest religions, with complex origins and no single founder. The most ancient scriptures of the religion were composed during the Vedic period (c. 1500–c. 500 BCE), and acknowledge the power of many gods. Temples were built to honor a chosen deity whose images were found throughout the shrine. How do you create a form to represent something that’s invisible while also conveying a sense of its great power? Divine beings are perceived as superhuman, so artists have been known to go beyond the limits of the regular human body to represent deities. Throughout Hindu art you’ll see multiple limbs, eyes, and heads, hybrid human and animal bodies, and figures with all kinds of fantastical aspects to their appearance. Hinduism is the most widely practiced religion in India today.

## Islam

The three religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism originated in South Asia and bear many similarities in beliefs and practices, all centered around the escape from the endless cycles of birth and rebirth to eventually achieve nirvana.

Islam, the second largest religion in the region today, was an import, arriving in India in the early seventh century CE. The roots of Islam connect it to Judaism and Christianity. The three are often referred to as the Abrahamic religions, and all center on the belief in a single God.

Islam is based on the teachings of Muhammad (c. 570–632 CE), who is considered to be the last prophet sent by God (Allah) to guide humanity to the right way. The religion's central text is the Koran, which practitioners (called Muslims) believe was verbally revealed by Allah to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. In Islam, the role of images and image makers are controversial. Islamic resistance to the representation of living beings stems from the belief that the creation of living forms is unique to Allah. Human and animal forms are therefore avoided in religious settings, but can be found in abundance in secular works made for the royal courts.

## Jainism

The Jain faith emphasizes complete non-violence and love toward all living beings, each of which is thought to contain elements of the same immortal soul. The word "Jain" derives from the Sanskrit word *jina*, which means "conqueror." There are twenty-four *jinās* (also known as spiritual teachers) in Jainism, celebrated for overcoming the perpetual cycle of birth and rebirth. Jains venerate these twenty-four liberated souls, with the goal of attaining spiritual liberation for themselves as well. Images often depict these "teaching gods" seated or standing in meditative postures, mostly without clothes. The absence of garments visually distinguishes the *jinās* from similar images of Buddhas.

# Connections to Educational Standards

## Common Core State Standards

### English Language Arts/Literacy Standards College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Reading

**Standard 7:** Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing

**Standard 9:** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research

### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening

**Standard 1:** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**Standard 2:** Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

**Standard 4:** Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience

### English Language Arts Standards History/Social Studies

**Standard 1:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

**Standard 2:** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

**Standard 7:** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem

## **National Visual Arts Standards**

**Responding: Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning**

**Anchor Standard:** Perceive and analyze artistic work.

**Anchor Standard:** Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

**Anchor Standard:** Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

**Connecting: Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context**

**Anchor Standard:** Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

**Anchor Standard:** Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

## **Pennsylvania Academic Standards for History**

**8.1.3-12A:** Understand, analyze, and evaluate patterns of continuity and change.

**8.1.3-12B:** Understand, explain, analyze, and synthesize historical sources.

**8.1.3-12C:** Understand, explain, analyze, and evaluate the fundamentals of historical interpretation.

**8.1.3-12D:** Understand, describe, analyze, and synthesize historical research (primary sources).

**8.4.3-12A:** Evaluate the significance of individuals and groups who made major political and cultural contributions to world history

**8.4.3-12B:** Identify, analyze and evaluate historical documents, material artifacts and historic sites in world history.

# Surya, Sun God

Around 1100s

Made in India (West Bengal) or Bangladesh

Phyllite

62 3/4 x 32 1/2 x 13 inches (159.4 x 82.6 x 33 cm)  
Weight: 1819 lb. (825.09 kg)

Gift of Mrs. N. R. Norton, Mrs. Richard Waln Meirs, Mrs. Edwin N. Benson, Jr., and Mrs. William A. M. Fuller in memory of Mrs. Jones Wister, 1927-9-1

Surya is an ancient god of the sun. Here he is depicted as a warrior with boots, a breastplate, and a dagger, standing in a chariot pulled by seven horses, creating day and time as he rides across the sky. His ride preserves life on earth as he delivers the sun's nourishing rays, warmth, and light. In art, Surya typically holds fully-opened lotus flowers in each hand, round like the sun. His chariot driver is Aruna (sunrise), who is responsible for guiding the sun across the sky. The sun god is frequently accompanied by two small female archers, Usha (dawn) and Pratyusha (dusk), who help drive away the darkness with their arrows. In this sculpture, Surya is flanked by male guardian attendants Pingala (with pen and inkpot) and Dandin (with sword and shield).

## Let's Look

Describe the poses and expressions of all these figures.

What kind of role does the scale of each figure play? Who is most important? Who's next?

Research the ancient Greek sun god Helios. How is Surya similar to and different from Helios?



- 1 Flaming rays of light emanate from behind Surya's head. Even his eyebrows are made of flames.
- 2 The lotuses that appear in Surya's hands are sacred flowers that open to the sun and close in the dark.
- 3 The seven horses that draw Surya's chariot across the sky.
- 4 This female figure and the one to the left are Usha (dawn) and Pratyusha (dusk). They are represented as archers whose arrows drive away darkness.
- 5 Aruna (sunrise), Surya's charioteer, is responsible for guiding the sun across the sky.
- 6 Surya's boots are strange footwear in India's heat. Legend says he wears them to dim his brilliance. Another explanation is that this god originated from a fire deity in Central Asia, a colder region to the north.
- 7 The four small figures on both sides of Surya represent the celestial bodies that were known in ancient India: six planets and the full and new moon. The ninth celestial body, and their chief, is Surya.





# Dancing Ganesha

Around 750

Made in India (possibly Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh)

From an exterior wall of a temple dedicated to Shiva

Sandstone

50 inches (127 cm)

Weight: 525 lb. (238.14 kg)

Purchased with the New Members Fund, 1971-154-1

Ganesha (guh-NESH-uh) is one of the most widely worshiped Hindu gods. Also known as the Lord of Beginnings and the Lord of Obstacles, Ganesha can create or remove challenges, or can help them be overcome. People pray to him at the start of any activity or undertaking, or when facing something difficult, to ensure its success.

In this sculpture, the god's movements are perfectly captured as he sways to the beat of the drummer at his feet and the sound of the bells around his ankles. Due to his dancing, the crown on his elephant-head has shifted slightly to one side. His multiple arms are a sign of his supernatural powers and accent the "S" curves of his dancing body. The large battle-ax in Ganesha's lower-right hand protects his worshipers from trouble and removes bad thoughts. His healthy appetite is suggested by the delicious radish treat he holds in his upper-left hand and the sweet round cake he grabs with his trunk. The snake around his pot belly recalls his father, Shiva, one of the principal deities of Hinduism who is often depicted wearing snakes as ornaments. Did you notice Ganesha's missing tusk? There are many stories about how his tusk got broken, one of which is that he removed it himself to transcribe the *Mahabharata*, a great Indian epic story.

Images of Ganesha are most frequently placed above a doorway or in a niche on the south wall of a temple, where worshipers begin their ritual walk around the building. Today, Ganesha is worshiped by people of different faiths throughout India, Southeast Asia, and around the world.

## Let's Look

What is the first thing you notice about this sculpture?

What's unusual about his body?

How many arms do you see? What do they hold?

How did the artist create a feeling of dancing in this sculpture?

# The Gods Sing and Dance for Shiva and Parvati

Around 1780–90

Made in India

Attributed to Khushala, Indian, active late 18th century

Opaque watercolor and gold on paper

Image: 8 × 12 inches (20.3 × 30.5 cm)

Sheet: 9 × 12 15/16 inches (22.9 × 32.9 cm)

125th Anniversary Acquisition. Alvin O. Bellak Collection, 2004-149-77

## Let's Look

Describe all the ways the artist used color to tell his story. What colors frame the scene? What colors draw our eyes to the action?

Now do the same for lines. What lines are mostly vertical or horizontal? Where are most of the active, curving lines? Which type of lines draw your attention the most?

The size of this painting is only 8 × 12 inches. Try to imagine the artist using a tiny brush and tiny pots of paint to create the details. Which details do you particularly enjoy?

There are many deities in the Hindu religion, but the artist of this watercolor wants us to know that for his purposes, the god Shiva and his wife Parvati reign supreme. He shows the royal couple seated in a clearing while an endless line of gods and goddesses wait to perform for them. This group is so large it winds away behind the trees.

Shiva and Parvati rest on a tiger skin. Divine dancers and musicians perform for them, and Shiva joins them, playing his hourglass-shaped drum. Other ways to identify the god Shiva in this painting are his ash-white skin, matted hair, snake jewelry, and the third eye.

This scene is set on the banks of a lake filled with pink lotuses—symbols of the divine—shown in all stages of their life cycle. The rolling hills, grazing deer, and flowering trees offer an ideal setting for a leisurely divine outing.





# The Monkeys and Bears Build a Bridge to Lanka

Around 1850

Made in India

Opaque watercolor and gold on paper

Image: 11 7/8 × 17 1/4 inches (30.2 × 43.8 cm)

Sheet: 14 7/8 × 20 3/8 inches (37.8 × 51.8 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lessing J. Rosenwald, 1959-93-82

This small, energetic painting illustrates an episode from the ancient epic poem, the *Ramayana* (Ra-mah-ya-na; *Legend of Lord Rama*). This story blends thrilling adventures, philosophical concepts, and religious truths related to Hinduism. Rama, the hero, is the model of an ideal king and is one of the human forms of the Hindu god Vishnu. In ancient times, storytellers memorized all of the epic's different parts, but today its 24,000 verses are organized into seven books.

In this scene from the sixth book, Rama and his younger brother Lakshmana (Lak-sh-mana) sit on the southern tip of India, armed with weapons and dressed in animal skins and leaves because they have been living in the forest. They look across the water to the mythical island of Lanka, where Rama's wife, Sita, is imprisoned by the demon Ravana. To rescue her, Rama instructs his army of monkeys and bears to build a bridge to Lanka. They carry great rocks on their heads and form them into a causeway, which cuts through a swirling jigsaw puzzle-like ocean inhabited by real and imagined sea creatures. In the background, more monkey and bear soldiers can be seen in the rolling hills, marching toward the shore to fight Ravana's demonic forces and save Sita.

## Let's Look

Describe the environment where this story is taking place. Use as many nouns as you can to name all the things the artist has put in the painting.

Now think about verbs. How would you describe the activities that these characters are engaged in?

What did the artist do make us look at every part of the painting?

Do you think this is one scene of the story or many? Why?

Can you find any characters that appear more than once in the picture? What does this tell you about the illustration?

## Krishna Lifts Mount Govardhana

Around 1700–25

Made in India (Mankot, Jammu and Kashmir)

Page from a dispersed series of the *Bhagavata Purana* (Story of the Lord Vishnu)

Opaque watercolor, gold, and silver-colored paint on paper

Image: 9 × 6 1/8 inches (22.9 × 15.6 cm)

Sheet: 11 3/8 × 8 3/8 inches (28.9 × 21.3 cm)

125th Anniversary Acquisition. Alvin O. Bellak Collection, 2004-149-31

### Let's Look

Describe the three different sections of the painting—above the mountain, the mountain, and below the mountain. What is happening in each area?

This painting is full of patterns. How many can you find?

What are the various moods shown in the painting? How did the artist create them?

Check out the feet in this painting—only Lord Krishna is wearing shoes. What else distinguishes him from the others?

Krishna, one of the most popular Indian divinities, has many associations and is known by various names. He is often worshiped as an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, known as the protector of the universe who maintains the balance between good and evil.

This page from an ancient manuscript depicts Lord Krishna lifting Mount Govardhana to shelter a cowherd village from a rainstorm invoked by Indra, Lord of Storms. The blue-skinned Krishna appears in yellow robes and an elaborate sash, playing a flute with one foot crossed. His white-skinned brother Balarama and his bearded stepfather Nanda hold up the mountain with flimsy staffs, thanks to Krishna's divine power. A host of animals—cobras, antelope, tigers, a leopard, and various birds—inhabit the cliffs of Govardhana as the rain pounds down from the storm clouds raging across the indigo sky, punctuated by gold flashes of lightning.

Two village women, one on either side of Krishna, gaze up at the mountain as they raise their fingers to their mouths in amazement. And two cowherd boys kneel at Krishna's feet, each holding a hand above his head as a gesture of respect to the god. Even the cows gaze up in worship of the Cowherd Lord. To the far right appears the god Indra, who caused the storm, recognized by the many eyes spotting his body. He is pressing his hands together in adoration, acknowledging the power of Lord Vishnu incarnate.

गैवर्गपत्रपत्रेण





## Harinegameshin Transfers Mahavira's Embryo

Around 1300–50

Made in India, (either Gujarat or Rajasthan)

Page from a dispersed manuscript of the *Kalpasutra* (*Story of the Jina Mahavira*)

Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on palm leaf

Sheet: 2 1/16 × 12 3/4 inches (5.2 × 32.4 cm)

125th Anniversary Acquisition. Purchased with the Stella Kramrisch Fund and with funds contributed by the Committee on Indian and Himalayan Art in honor of Alvin O. Bellak, 2001-184-1

### Let's Look

Describe the people and writing you see on the page.

How does this book shape differ from books you're familiar with?

What would it be like to write or paint on such a surface? What challenges would such a long thin shape pose?

Many world religions tell stories of miraculous births of their gods and spiritual leaders. This palm leaf page is from a sacred Jain text that narrates the life of Mahavira, the last *jina* (spiritual teacher) who lived during the sixth century BCE. The page depicts Harinegameshin (Hah-ri-ne-gah-me-shin), the goat-headed divine helper, placing the embryo of Mahavira into the womb of Queen Trishala, the upper caste mother to whom he was born.

Before paper was widely used in India, religious texts were written on dried palm leaves. Many of the earliest palm leaf books were commissioned by devotees of Jainism, who donated the books to monastic libraries to gain spiritual merit. Since more costly manuscripts accrued greater merit for the donor, Jain illustrations abound with expensive pigments such as gold and the rich blue made from ground lapis lazuli.

In palm leaf books, text runs continuously from left to right, and is interrupted periodically by illustrations of important scenes. Each page has a central bordered area with a hole in the middle. Through this hole would have run a string that tied the pages together and wrapped around the long wooden covers. To read the book, the string would need to be loosened and each page flipped along the long side in turn.



These palm leaf pages are sandwiched between two wooden covers. The string that would have bound everything together is missing, but you can see the hole where it would have gone in the center.

*Manuscript of the Devimahatmya (Story of the Great Goddess)*, 1603, Nepal (Purchased with the Stella Kramrisch Fund, 2001-70-1)



Illustration showing a divine helper placing the embryo of Mahavira into the womb of the queen. The figures are drawn in a way that makes them most readable to the viewer—with faces shown in profile and both eyes in frontal view.



Detail of text on the palm leaf page, read horizontally from left to right. Pages were flipped up so text on the back of the page is written upside down in order to be legible to the reader (not shown).



# Jina (Jain Savior-Saint) Seated in Meditation

Around 1000s

Made in India (Tamil Nadu)

Granite

42 x 40 x 14 1/2 inches (106.7 x 101.6 x 36.8 cm)

Weight: 876 lb. (397.35 kg)

Acquired from the National Museum, New Delhi, India (by exchange), with funds contributed by Mr. and Mrs. Roland L. Taylor and with Subscription and Museum funds, 1968-30-1

This large, granite sculpture represents a Jainist spiritual teacher called a *jina*. *Jinas* are individuals who have conquered all desires and inner violence. By practicing self-control, helping others, and not harming any living being, they have escaped from the cycles of birth and death to achieve a state of spiritual perfection.

With his legs crossed and hands folded in a yogic posture of meditation, this *jina* embodies spiritual perfection through simplicity and serenity. His peaceful facial features, soft curls of hair, and elongated ears indicate his divine status and demonstrate the peaceful and nonviolent nature of Jain beliefs.

Jainism is one of the most ancient religions in India, with approximately 5 million followers worldwide. Jains venerate twenty-four of these spiritual teachers, or *jinas*, whose pure souls have traveled from the cycle of the world (*samsara*) to a place of spiritual liberation (*moksha*) and are free of perpetual rebirth.

## Let's Look

Describe the pose, facial features, and expression of this figure.

As you observe the sculpture, come up with three words to describe its mood.

What do you think the sculpture is made of? Describe the texture of the material. How does that contribute to the mood of the sculpture?

Compare this sculpture with the sculpture of Ganesha. How did the sculptors express stillness and tranquility in this sculpture and playful activity in Ganesha?

## Qasam al-Abbas Arrives from Mecca and Crushes Tahmasp with a Mace

Around 1562–77

Made in India or Pakistan

Opaque watercolor and gold- and silver-colored metallic paint on cotton

31 x 25 1/2 inches (78.7 x 64.8 cm)

Gift by exchange with the Brooklyn Museum, 1937-4-1

### Let's Look

What colors, shapes, and patterns do you see?

Describe the people and animals you see in this picture.

Who are the main characters in this battle?

Who do you think will win? What makes you say that?

How did the artist show depth in this picture?

This dramatic battle scene comes from the *Hamzanama* (Ham-za-nah-ma; *Adventures of Hamza*), a monumental illustrated manuscript that recounts the fantastic adventures of Hamza, an uncle of the Prophet Muhammad. These illustrations were made for the Mughal Emperor Akbar (ruled 1556–1605), who gathered talented painters from Persia and India in his court workshop in Delhi.

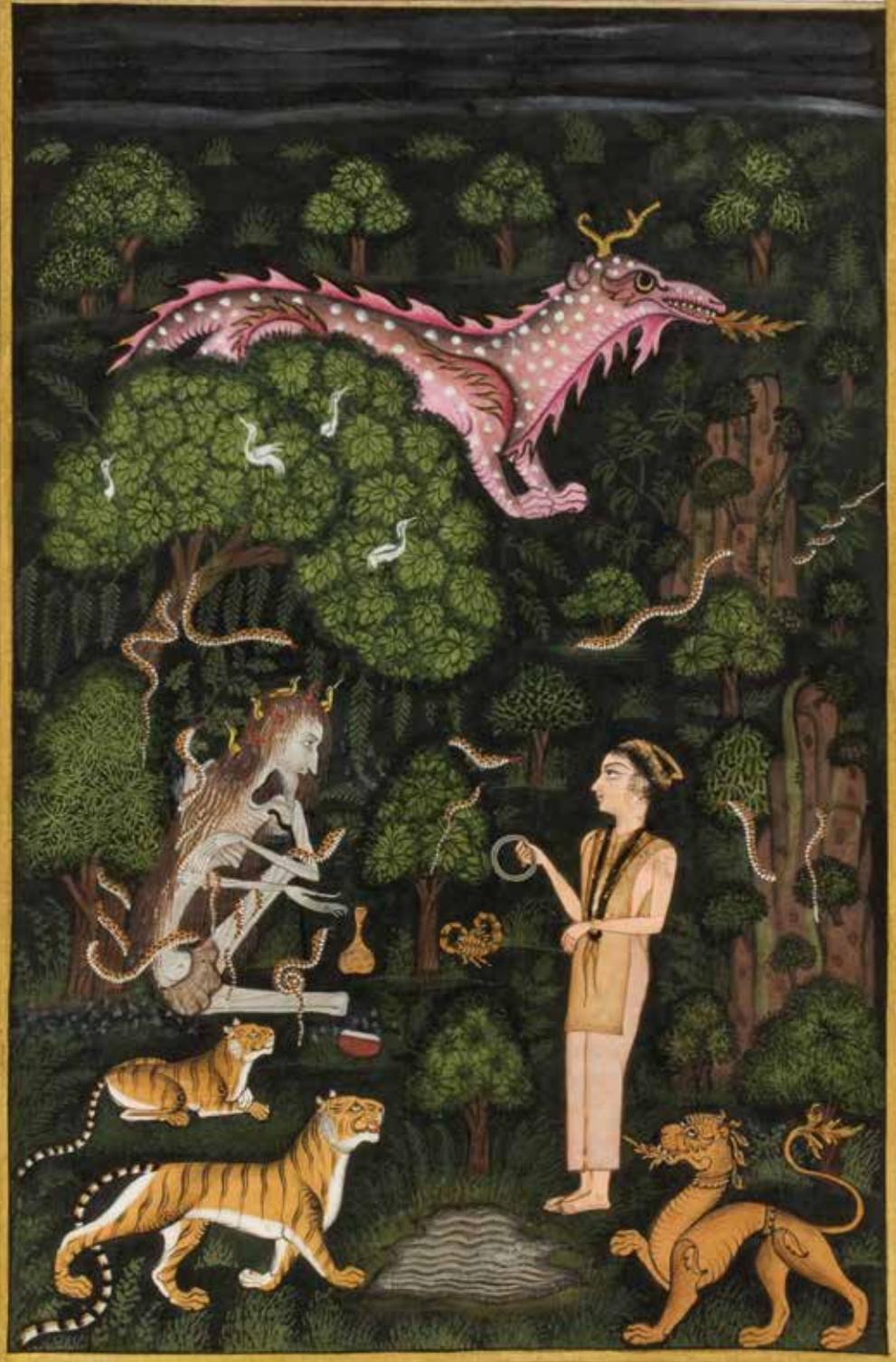
The figure on the right is Qasam al-Abbas (Qua-sam al-abas); he is fighting the Persian king Tahmasp (Tah-masib) on the left. Each man's nationality is hinted at by the animal he rides and his clothing: Qasam is mounted on a camel and wears a white cloth fastened in his helmet and looped around his face to indicate his Arab origins. Tahmasp rides a beautifully outfitted horse in gold armor with elaborate textiles while holding a sword and shield. Although Qasam is shown smaller in scale in the background, he ferociously strikes his enemy with a mace, making Tahmasp's horse stumble. Dust from the desert separates the army spectators from the dramatic action.

With 1,400 hand-painted illustrations bound in twelve volumes, each about 32 by 25 inches, the *Hamzanama* is the largest book ever made in India.



در آمدن پسر عباس بن علی در کربلا

سلا باندرک ؛ لی کمرسون اپن



# Prince Manohar Receives a Magic Ring from a Hermit

1743

Made in India (Deccan region)

Page from the manuscript *Gulshan-i 'Ishq (Rose Garden of Love)*

Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on paper

14 × 10 inches (35.6 × 25.4 cm)

The Philip S. Collins Collection, gift of Mrs. Philip S. Collins in memory of her husband, 1945-65-22

This painting comes from a manuscript of the *Rose Garden of Love*, a love story written by the poet Nusrati in 1657–58. The poet creates a world filled with lush gardens and magical beings as star-crossed lovers Prince Manohar and Princess Madhumalati (mad-who-MAL-ah-tee) face daunting challenges and painful separations before they can live “happily ever after”—a metaphor of the soul’s search for the divine.

In this illustration, Manohar encounters a gaunt holy man covered with serpents, who gives Manohar a magic wheel for protection. The prince is to use this wheel to fight off challenges when all else fails in his quest to find his princess. Tigers and a fire-breathing mythical lion close in on Manohar as birds and serpents sneak out of dense foliage of the trees above. Further up, a large spotted dragon emerges from deeper in the forest to further threaten the prince.

This forest garden symbolizes everything that is unknown in the universe. The translated text describes the holy man as having become part of the garden itself: “His locks of hair stretched out like hanging twigs in which birds have made their nests. His arms and legs were thin like dry sticks but his body shone like the Moon.”

Royal patrons in the courts of India often commissioned illustrated manuscripts like this to enjoy and convey their wealth and appreciation of the arts. The artists who made them would accompany the story with opulent paintings that could enable a reader to follow the narrative through the images alone, taking an imaginative mental journey.

## Let’s Look

Describe the animals, creatures, and characters you see.

Where is this story taking place?

How would you describe the mood of this place?

What kind of interaction do you think the two characters are having?



# Avalokiteshvara, Bodhisattva of Compassion

Around 450–475

Made in India (Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh)

Gupta dynasty

Sandstone

48 1/2 × 15 1/2 × 7 inches (123.2 × 39.4 × 17.8 cm)  
Weight: 290.5 lb. (131.77 kg)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-1

This beautiful sandstone Avalokiteshvara (ah-vah-lo-kih-**TESH**-vah-rah), which is Sanskrit for “Lord who looks down,” is a sculptural embodiment of the Buddhist ideal of compassion. Avalokiteshvara is a bodhisattva (bo-dee-**SAHT**-vah), a compassionate being that delays their already attained salvation until all other beings are released from the cycle of time. The Amitabha, or Buddha of the Western Paradise, sits in the headdress of Avalokiteshvara. The lower legs and arms of the figure are missing, but the right arm and hand probably hung down, lightly holding a falling piece of drapery, while the left hand likely held the stem of the lotus that still remains on the oval halo behind the Avalokiteshvara’s head. His heavy eye lids, full lips, rounded face, and subtly tilted slender body are contributions of the Gupta period (320–550 CE), the so-called golden age of Indian art. Avalokiteshvara was carved in Sarnath, where Buddha gave his first public sermon following his enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. The sculpture would probably have been placed in a Buddhist shrine or monastic environment. Being in the presence of a highly compassionate being, one is reminded of the promise the bodhisattva makes to ensure that all beings will one day become enlightened.

## Let’s Look

What details do you notice about this statue’s facial features and hair?

What do you notice about this statue’s clothes and posture?

What words would you use to describe this being? Why?

Representations of Avalokiteshvara vary from culture to culture. Research other images of Avalokiteshvara and compare it with this one. How do they look different or similar?



# Vajradhara (the source of all teachings on how to achieve enlightenment)

1400s

Made in Tibet

Colors on cloth; cloth mounting

Image: 28 1/4 x 25 inches (71.8 x 63.5 cm)

Mount: 39 1/2 x 26 1/2 inches (100.3 x 67.3 cm)

Framed: 47 x 43 x 2 1/4 inches (119.4 x 109.2 x 5.7 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-640

*Thangka* is the Tibetan term for a painting made on cloth that can be rolled up for travel or storage and unrolled and hung for use. These cloths usually depict Buddhist deities, renowned religious teachers, or a mandala (a symbolic picture of the universe). Because a *thangka* can be ritually infused with the spirit of a deity, it offers devotees direct contact with the divine when they use it as a tool in meditation.

The central deity in this painting is Vajradhara (vuj-rah-dah-ra), the supreme essence of the multiple Buddhas in Himalayan Buddhism. He is the source of all teachings on how to achieve enlightenment, which is emphasized here by his gestures, the attributes (symbolic features) that surround him, and his attendants.

Vajradhara is seated on a lion throne in a meditative lotus position. His hands perform a ritual gesture called the *humkara mudra*, which is symbolic of bringing the two aspects of "method" and "wisdom" together to achieve enlightenment. The attributes represented are a bell and a *vajra* (multipronged scepter whose name translates as either "diamond" or "thunderbolt"). The bell symbolizes wisdom, the feminine aspect of enlightenment, while the thunderbolt symbolizes method, the masculine aspect of enlightenment. Vajradhara's two attendants are holding skull cups, curved knives, and long staffs. When these items are held by female deities, as is the case here, the knife-cup pair symbolizes wisdom's destruction of all obstacles to enlightenment. Vajradhara is surrounded by eighty-seven practitioners who have already attained spiritual enlightenment.

## Let's Look

Describe the organization of these figures.

How is scale used to determine which figures are most important?

Look at all the smaller figures. How many different hand gestures and postures do you see?

The central figure of Vajradhara seems filled with peace. How has the artist achieved this?

Do all the other figures look as peaceful? Why or why not?



- 1 Vajradhara is surrounded by 87 mahasiddhas (adepts). Mahasiddhas are Tantric practitioners who have already attained spiritual enlightenment through unconventional and often bizarre practices.
- 2 The vajra (thunderbolt) symbolizes method, the masculine aspect of enlightenment.
- 3 The bell symbolizes wisdom, the feminine aspect of enlightenment.
- 4 Vajradhara's hands are in humkara mudra, with the right "method" forearm placed in front of the left "wisdom" forearm, signifying that enlightenment depends on the merging of the two.
- 5 Two wrathful female attendants hold skull cups, curved knives, and long staffs. When held by female deities, the knife-cup pair symbolizes wisdom's destruction of all obstacles to enlightenment.
- 6 Vajradhara is seated in lotus position, associated with meditation.
- 7 Like royalty, Vajradhara is seated on a lion throne.

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Front cover: *The Monkeys and Bears Build a Bridge to Lanka* (detail), around 1850,  
India (Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lessing J. Rosenwald, 1959-93-82)

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