

Reimagining the Divine Art of Asia at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

By Jon Hurdle

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PHILADELPHIA — The Philadelphia Museum of Art’s renowned collection of South Asian art had a problem: Despite a dazzling array of artifacts that thrilled scholars and absorbed curators, it made no sense to the general public.

Museum officials feared that most visitors were unmoved by the galleries full of stone sculptures and other objects, and that viewers failed to understand the connections between pieces or what these works said about the art and culture of the region. Officials’ concerns were confirmed by an independent survey of visitor experiences, and by anecdotal reports from museum guides.

“It had just gotten tired,” said Darielle Mason, the Stella Kramrisch Curator of Indian and Himalayan Art. “Unless you had a really deep understanding of the material, of the geography, the history, you were lost.”



A water vessel from the 11th century. Sabina Louise Pierce for The New York Times

It was time to recast the presentation of these objects from India, Pakistan, Tibet and Thailand — this time across cultures and mediums, so that people would better understand the themes that link sculpture, painting, pottery, woodwork, textiles and metalwork created over many centuries.

“We were dealing with so many countries, 2,000 years of art, that to make a single linear chronology was not the best way to communicate this information,” Ms. Mason said.

The result is the reimagined, re-lit and in some places rebuilt series of galleries that reopened on Oct. 2 after an 18-month, \$2.7 million makeover, the first for 40 years. Paintings and textiles will change every six to 12 months, drawing from the museum’s collection of some 5,000 South Asian objects, one of the biggest and most valuable in North America.

The approximately 200 objects on display in the new galleries are presented in two major themes: “Art and the Divine” and “Art, Power, Status,” showing how different civilizations have used art to relate to God and to assert wealth and power.



A shrine hanging, from the 18th century. Sabina Louise Pierce for The New York Times

Shrine hangings depicting mythological stories and characters are juxtaposed with ivory carvings, intricate woodwork and stone or metal representations of deities, and interpreted by interactive video screens as well as conventional labeling.

Don’t miss three terra-cotta horses, once used as offerings to India’s agrarian gods, that now exemplify a link between art and the divine, and are accompanied by a contemporary photograph by Jitu Mishra that shows these horses in a ritual: a farmer’s seeking of a blessing for his crops amid dozens of the figures.

Also in the “Art and the Divine” gallery, an eighth-century Indian sandstone sculpture of a dancing Ganesha is accompanied by a video showing a contemporary dancer evoking the elephantine god’s movements.

And on the opposite wall, a six-foot-high shrine hanging — on display for the first time since its creation in the late 18th and early 19th centuries — tells the story of an important rite for followers of the Pushtimarg, or path to grace, traced by devotees of the Hindu god Krishna. It is one of two recent gifts donated by H. Peter Stern, founder of the renowned Storm King sculpture park in New Windsor, N.Y.



An image of the god Shiva. Sabina Louise Pierce for The New York Times

While the galleries present many objects in a new context, their centerpiece remains the 16th-century reconstructed outer building of a temple from the south Indian city of Madurai, and the world's only standing example of pre-modern Hindu temple architecture outside India.

The carved columns were once leveled outside the main temple building, probably because the outer hall was demolished to make way for a new road built by the British colonial administration in the mid 19th century, Ms. Mason believes.

The parts were rescued in 1912, shipped to Philadelphia, and reassembled at the museum in its first location, Memorial Hall.

In its new presentation, the Temple Hall is more brightly lit, reflecting Ms. Mason's recent research that showed the building was a place of celebration rather than a dark, mysterious space, which she said was a misinterpretation by past scholars and led to many of its features being obscured by poor light.



A dancing Ganesha sculpture from the eighth century.
Sabina Louise Pierce for The New York Times

“It would have been filled with light, it would have looked out on the countryside,” Ms. Mason said. “The idea was to bring back the air and the light and the sense of celebration that it originally had and allow you to see all of the wonderful carving.”

An adjoining room contains objects used by rulers or dynasties to assert their wealth and visually distinguish themselves from others. Artifacts include an ornate wooden doorway from the home of a wealthy Pakistani family in the early 1700s, a carved ivory throne leg with an elephant-headed lion and dating from the mid-13th century, and a 10th-century granite sculpture of the god Shiva that once stood in a temple patronized by the powerful Chola dynasty.

Elsewhere, the Rose Garden of Love, an Indian manuscript from 1743, tells a classic love story set in a world of lush gardens and magical beings. It is arguably the finest complete version of the manuscript to survive, museum officials say. The manuscript has been interpreted by the artist Shahzia Sikander, whose video animation is installed in a hexagonal alcove topped by a 300-year-old coffered ceiling from Isfahan, in present-day Iran.

A schist carving of Nandi, the sacred bull of Shiva, from 13th-century India was made as part of a temple, commissioned under the Hoysala rulers of south-central India. It is among the best examples of Hoysala sculpture outside India.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art's new South Asia Galleries, 2600 Benjamin Franklin Parkway Philadelphia, PA 19130; philamuseum.org.

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