Vishnu and his Avatars 71.1

Artist/Culture: Unknown Indian
Date: c. 10th Century
Place: Central Region, India
Medium: Red Sandstone
Dimensions: 138.4 x 80 x 21.3 cm

This large, complex relief sculpture once adorned the exterior of a Hindu temple. Before entering, visitors prepared for meditation by studying elaborate imagery. The central figure is Vishnu, the preserver of the world. You can identify him by his attributes: on the right he holds a chakra or discus, signifying mind or spirit. On the left, the tall mace means combating ignorance. Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva are the three most important Hindu gods. Look at the figure above the mace—that’s the god Brahma. Shiva, the destroyer, is on the opposite side of Vishnu, above the discus. The figures flanking Vishnu’s feet personify his attributes. The figure on the very left is a human representation of the discus in Vishnu’s left hand. At the top of the carving is a fish and a tortoise. They, and the other figures at the top of this sculpture are Vishnu’s avatars, or earthly incarnations.

Online Resources:
Hirsch Library Online Catalog
MET Museum of Art Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Articles: (full-text access available on-site; off-site access available through your school library or HPL System)

Print Resources:
Bibliography

Object Specific Information
N 576 .H7 A3 n.s. v.2 Ready Ref.

General Surveys of Indian Art
N 5300 .G25 2005

Hinduism
BL 1105 .L65 2011 Ref.
BL 1111.4 .W55 2008 Ref

Vishnu
NX 680.3 .C48 B43
N 8195.3 .V3 V57 2011

India
DS 421 J6 1996 Ref.
N 7301 .C7 1997

Indian Sculpture/Art
NB 1002 .N4 1984

Symbolism
N 893 .A4 B86 1997 Reserves
N 7740 .H35 1994
BL 1216 .J26 1993 Ref

This reference guide is just the tip of the iceberg on helpful resources in the library’s holdings. Many of the suggested resources above have their own bibliographies. Each of these may lead you to another resource that would also be helpful in your research here in the museum or in another library. To find additional resources, use keywords such as “Hindu,” “India,” and “sculpture” in the online catalog and in periodical indexes. Once you find a few relevant titles, pay attention to the subject headings to identify similar materials. Examples of useful subject headings are:

- Hindu mythology
- Hindu art
- India Civilization
- Sculpture, Indic
- Art, Indic

For guidelines about writing it may be helpful to look at Sylvan Barnet’s *A Short Guide to Writing about Art*, which includes tips for looking, reading, and writing about art. Ask for it at the reference desk. At every stage of your work, please allow the library staff to help you. Contact us at 713-639-7323 or Hirsch@mfah.org