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Exhibition Catalog Entry

Sculptural panel form a temple
Schist stone
Bihar, Eastern India
10th Century (ca. 950 - 1000)
Dimensions: 15 1/2 in. x 29 1/4 in. x 4 1/2 in. (39.37 cm x 74.3 cm x 11.43 cm)
San Diego Museum of Art

Astronomy played a major role in Hinduism and Hindu rituals. The \textit{Navagrahas}, nine spiritual planetary deities, were considered to play a major role in individual’s lives and their destinies. It was believed that they influenced everything good and bad that happened in a person’s life, and so worshipping these nine deities became a big part of Hindu culture (Purohit, \textit{Navagraha - The Nine Planets in Hindu Astrology}). The \textit{Navagrahas} were present and could be worshipped in every temple. Nevertheless, because of the power and influence hindus believed they held, many temples around southern India arose dedicated specifically to these figures. The vastness praise of the \textit{Navagrahas} was deeply rooted in Hindu culture. They were present in the daily lives of many Indians who believed worshipping them and praying to them would help them receive and achieve the best that each day could offer (Jayaram, \textit{Navagrahas, the Nine Planetary Gods in Hinduism}).

This relief panel features nine figures representing the \textit{Navagrahas}. The nine deities shown, from left to right, are: Surya (the Sun), Candra (the Moon), Mangala (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Brhaspati (Jupiter), Sukra (Venus), Sani (Saturn), Rahu (eclipses), and Kethu (comets) (Purohit, \textit{Navagraha}). The term ‘\textit{Nava}’ is translated as “nine” and ‘\textit{Graha}’ has been linked to the word “planet” (Markel, \textit{Indian Planetary Deities}). However, it is clear that not all nine deities are planets. The sun and the moon are the most obvious outliers of this term, but
Rahu and Kethu also don’t represent planets. Rahu is the demon of eclipses, and Kethu is the personification of comets. The term Navagraha doesn’t refer specifically to planets, but to these heavenly bodies that have relative movement in relation to the unmoving stars in the skies (Markel, Indian Planetary Deities). Therefore, making the time and date of a person’s birth extremely important for the worship of these deities. People would worship each deity based on their position in the sky at the moment of their birth; some of them being more helpful to some than others. In addition, the Navagrahas were considered gods, and the understanding of each one and proper worship was essential in obtaining all around prosperity in one’s life (Jayaram, Navagrahas, the Nine Planetary Gods in Hinduism).

The differences between the deities are shown in this relief. Each figure is depicted differently, from the different accessories and poses to the artifacts they are holding. The artifacts seen here in the relief are representational of the deities. However, some are also objects of special significance in the Hindi culture and can also be seen in other forms of Hindu-Indian art. For instance, the sun is depicted with two full lotuses at each side of his face. The lotus in Hindi culture is a symbol of life, fertility, and youth. In Hindu mythology, Lord Brahma used different parts of the lotus plant to create the universe (Lotus Sculpture). The lotuses seen here next to Surya, the Sun, are a representation of the power of the the sun itself; it is the source of energy and life on this earth. The presence of sacred objects in the relief demonstrates that this relief was made for worship, and it was of spiritual importance.

The objects seen being held by the deities here are not the only points of importance in this piece. The hand gestures shown by each of the deities adds to the spirituality and worship nature of this relief. Hand gestures, or mudras, were carefully chosen in art works to portray specific messages. Mudras in Indian religious art were incredibly important because each different gesture portrays a specific character of each deity in this moment (McCord, Secret Language of Hands). Each gesture can symbolize things like meditation, reassurance, and it can even be gestures of protection or warning. In this relief, most of the figures are making the Chin or Vitarka mudra, with the thumb and forefinger touching. This is a gesture of mindfulness. The only other clear different gesture is that of Kethu, the personification of comets, and it is the Namaskara mudra, which is a polite form of greeting (McCord, Secret Language of Hands).
This piece was one that was probably meant to evoke a message of welcomeness and peacefulness. During this era, a lot of temples were rising up in southern India due to belief that it would bring forth good karma. Only some were dedicated to the Navagrahas themselves. However, even if the temple wasn’t dedicated specifically to them, the planetary deities were very present in Hindu temples. The main artistic function of these depictions of the heavenly bodies was so the sculpture or reliefs could be placed atop the entrance to a temple, “in order to help demarcate the sacrosanct threshold and to protect the temple” (Markel, Indian Planetary Deities).

The nine planetary deities were among the most worshipped and respected of Indian spiritual figures. They were not only worshipped at temples, but they were included in the every day lives of those who believed in their astrological forces. They were seen as those who drove all the good and the bad in a person’s life, and therefore were highly present in everyday life. Like todays astrology, the Navagrahas were seen to manage and influence people and their paths based on their time and date of birth.


