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## Exhibition Review

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## VII. EXHIBITION REVIEW

### \*Himalayan Images as "Manifestations of Shiva"

Review by Ronald Bernier, Department of Fine Arts, University of Colorado

The exhibition that is touring Fort Worth, Seattle, and Los Angeles after its highly successful opening at the Philadelphia Museum of Art is a landmark event, if not in the "blockbuster" category of certain popular/commercial extravaganzas in recent years. It is the most important South Asia presentation since "The Sensuous Immortals" travelled from Los Angeles in 1978 and it will never be repeated. Author of the excellent catalogue and responsible for the entire concept, as well as the selection of objects, is the eminent scholar Dr. Stella Kramrisch, Curator of Indian Art. This exhibition is intended to be a "convincing reflection of the character of the god Shiva as a creative force in Indian life," and it succeeds.

183 sculptures and paintings capture Śiva's multiple personalities and powers with various degrees of narrative and aesthetic complexity in stone, metal, wood, clay, and paint. This short review points to some significant works from the Himalayas as reminders of the unique contributions of this region to Śaivite art and iconography.

In sculpture, a small (7 3/4") bronze that portrays elephant-headed Gaṇeśa as son of Śiva with Malla Dynasty fluidity from the 14th century captures the grace and technical virtuosity of Nepalese style, while Śiva and Pārvatī are shown in a crowd of attendants atop Mt. Kailasa in a 10th century limestone carving from the Denver Art Museum with the clearly defined complexity for which Nepalese art is also known. Works of art are grouped according to their meaning (River Goddess Gaṅgā, Liṅga, Nandin, Lord of Music, etc.) but certain examples stand out because they are special to the north, like a Harihara as combined Śiva and Viṣṇu from the 9th century that captures in green soapstone the remarkably compact and taut volumes of Kashmiri style. As a survivor of Islamic iconoclasm the carving is rare, but even less familiar is a brass plaque 11 inches high that is assigned to Himachal Pradesh and the 6th-8th century. Both sculptures are frontal and powerfully direct. Like a small 17th/19th century brass Śiva from Himachal Pradesh that is "all eyes," many Himalayan works retain folk art simplicity that effectively contrasts the elegant refinement of Chola Dynasty bronzes from South India that are recognizable to the general public as they symbolize the exhibition.

Paintings take the characters introduced by sculpture into the full life of narrative story. Some are made on cloth, others on palm leaves, but most are on paper. Their degree of sophistication is as varied as their palettes and Himalayan examples predominate as Śiva's stories are told. The western Panjab Hills provide most of the paintings, with Mewar and the early 16th century suggested as intense, folk-oriented beginning of the miniature tradition in such works as "Śiva amidst Other Gods (The Solace of the Earth Cow)." Final refinement and general cooling of mood and color are found in the well-known Kangra school and works like "The Holy Family in a Cremation Ground" of c. 1810. It is significant that between these two poles many exhibition choices have been made from areas such as Basholi, Mankot, Guler, Chamba, Garhwal, Nurpur, Bilaspur, and Kashmir. "The Blessed Goddess Kālī (Bhadrakali)" of 1660-70, Basohli, is a sunburst of triumphant, glowing energy that is as sharp as an appliqué, while "Śiva chasing Mohinī" of c. 1790, Garhwal, is as subtle in color and meticulous in detail as any miniature anywhere. Panjab Hills painting is marked by continuous invention in its visual poetry, as it shows a frozen moon in "The Five Celestial Sages in Barren, Icy Heights" (Guler, c.

1800-1820), a shower of heavenly blossoms as "Pārvatī Greets Śiva in His Beauty" (Kangra, c. 1815-20), and rainbow-rock cave as setting for Śiva's bliss in "The Holy Family in a Cave" (Mandi, c. 1810-20).

Panjab Hills narratives are offset by highly patterned graphs of Centers of Realization from Kashmir, 1800-1850. And there are fine examples of the still more separate, and more important, Nepalese school. With their heritage of Pala/Sena and Tibetan influences, plus indigenous tastes and skill, Nepalese paintings have jewel-like preciousness and evocative strength of color that equal the best of Panjab traditions. A 12th century book cover portrays "Adoration of the Linga by the Gods" in opaque watercolor on primed wood as it exemplifies the sinuous and sensual line for which Nepal is famous. Crimson color sets the mood of a large (32 1/4 x 26 3/4") poubhā painting on cotton in the mid-15th century to show "Agastya" as avatar, and "Shrines of Śiva" (c. 1750) stand out in architectural precision as they house a family of gods against a mountain backdrop of brilliant red. The paintings are big in impact, not just physical size, and they mark once more the importance of Himalayan contributions to the art and meaning of Śiva, deity of many forms and personalities "from whom all worlds are born." In this important showing both the strength of Śiva and the genius of Himalayan creativity are manifest.