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## Title of Object

Lintel with Vishnus and Celestial Musicians

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown

**Culture:** India (Hindu)

**Date of Object:** 12<sup>th</sup> century

**Country:** India

**Accession Number:** 96.54.2

**File Created:** 4/15/2016

**Material/Medium:** Grey limestone sculptural relief

**Author of File:** Lucy Hicks

**Department:** Chinese, South and Southeast Asian Art

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 6/28/2016

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## Tour Topics

Group 3 tour, ancient culture, animals/birds, architecture, fertility, gods/goddesses, music, power/status, relationships/family, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, stories/storytelling, symbolism, Hinduism

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Describe what you see here?
2. If you were to run your hand along this piece, how would it feel?
3. Why do you think a temple like this is adorned so ornately?
4. The God Vishnu is front and center in this piece (and this architectural piece came from a temple for worshiping him), do you see other faces/people/gods on this piece and why do you think they are included here and why is Vishnu so prominent in this piece?
5. How would you feel walking into a temple decorated like this?
6. What do you have in your home that is as richly decorated like this?

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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Hindu temple 1) Hindu temples date back to the first millennium BCE. It was between 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century that the style of temple in south and north India diverged. Large niches in the three exterior walls of the sanctum house sculpted images that portray various aspects of the deity enshrined within. The sanctum image expresses the essence of the deity. For instance, the niches of a temple dedicated to Vishnu may portray his incarnations. Every surface of the exterior of a temple would be carved like this piece. Hindus believe temples represent the house or body of god and should be honored with adornment.

2) Images of the god on the outer walls give the inner deity personality and create individual forms for personal worship.

3) Temples were built to enshrine the image of the chosen deity, and the exterior walls of these temples were covered with numerous sculpted images and masses of decorative carvings. Relief carvings from the myths of the enshrined deity played an important role in glorifying the god whose various manifestations found a place in the niches on the temple walls. In addition, sculptors carved a variety of auspicious motifs that included overflowing foliage, figures of women, and images of embracing couples, all of which suggested growth, abundance, and prosperity. The curvilinear tower like superstructure over the main shrine of the typical temple takes 1 of 2 forms: single spired or multi turreted. The main figure of the deity is housed in this tower.

4) At the entrance of a Vishnu temple will be guardians of Vishnu who carry one of the weapons of Vishnu—a club (gada). Temples often will have many structures within the compound.

5) This piece has carvings of animals and the 3 temples seen are replicas of the temple this piece would have come from. These differing figures represent the Hindu sense of cosmic and world order. Other representations on the end of the piece show Vishnu crushing evil beings. Vishnu is described as that which is free of fetters or bondages and prevails over everything. He is seated here in the middle flanked by Lakshmi (goddess of fortune and Vishnu's wife) and Sarasvati (goddess of self and another wife of Vishnu). He is holding his attributes in his 4 hands: mace, the chakra, a conch and a lotus blossom/to show purity.

6) Musicians playing drums, horns, and cymbals make their way up the center of the arch.

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

1) The Hindu god Vishnu is often portrayed with a war discus (chakra) and wears a tall crown (personifies regal qualities) and rich jewelry. He was believed to have been born on earth 9 times, the 10<sup>th</sup> time is yet to come. Having multiple arms is a sign of divine status.

2) Often portrayed with Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, and one of his wives.

Often portrayed with Sarasvati (Saraswati)—in Sanskrit means essence of self. Her vehicle is the swan and she is another wife of Vishnu.

3) Vishnu is the preserver and protector of the universe (Brahma is the creator of the universe and Shiva is the destroyer). Vishnu is also a god of love and emotion; this love flows from the devotee to the god and vice versa. He is the server of established order and represents qualities which are of most value to the Hindu religion.

4) Garuda (the eagle, often shown as a birdman) is Vishnu's mount and embodies Vishnu's pervasiveness through the association of a bird's flight in the air. Garuda will be found atop a tall pillar in Vishnu temples.

5) The lintel is thought to have originally crowned a large sculpture of Vishnu in the niche beneath it. The temple's architectural structure is reproduced in the three shrines displayed on the lintel, an exquisite illustration of the precise relationship of the temple's individual parts to its whole.

6) A visit to a Hindu temple is considered a pilgrimage and will improve your Karma. Hindus will fast for several days before, and while on the pilgrimage will sing hymns, pray and might shave their heads as a sign of respect. Temples tend to be built on mountain tops, rivers' edge and other gathering places. From the altar, the deity radiates through the temple to pervade all space within the compound. Temple architecture varies greatly from the 11th century on, but does keep some regional style. Columns, usually with bases of 4-8 sides, central sections of 16 sides and circular tops stand in rows or form an interior octagon. Linking them overhead are wavelike arches elaborately carved with figures or vegetation and often issuing from the mouths of mythical creatures.

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### Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This intricately carved lintel is a small sample of the exuberant sculpture that covered the temple's entire exterior. The god Vishnu holds a discus and conch shell and appears seven times in various seated positions, sometimes on the back of his vehicle Garuda (an eagle that is frequently anthropomorphic), suggesting that the lintel originally crowned a large sculpture of Vishnu in the niche beneath it. The temple's architectural structure is reproduced in the three shrines displayed on the lintel, an exquisite illustration of the precise relationship of the temple's individual parts to its whole. Musicians playing drums, horns, and cymbals make their way up the center of the arch, and gorgeous celestial beings emerge out of the mouths of mythical aquatic creatures *makaras* at either side.

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### Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

*Hindu Art and Architecture* by George Michell, 2000

*Myths & Symbols in Indian Art* by Heinrich Zimmer, 1974

*Indian Sculpture* by Grace Morley, 2005

*Hindu Art* by T Richard Blurton, 1993

*Gods, Guardians and Lovers* by Vishakka Desai, 1993

*Indian Temple Sculptures* by John Guy, 1949

BBC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/deities/vishnu.shtml>

Oxford Art Online

Metmuseum.org (Here is a sculpture of Vishnu:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38146> )

Pennmuseum.org

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Class notes